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AURORA FLOYD.

LONDON: PRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, STAMFORD STREET,
AND CHARING CROSS.

AURORA FLOYD.

BY

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AUTHOR OF "LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 18 CATHERINE STREET, STRAND.

1863.

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AURORA FLOYD.

CHAPTER I.

AT THE GOLDEN LION.

Mr. William Dork, the constable, reached Doncaster at about a quarter-past one o'clock upon the morning after the murder, and drove straight to the Reindeer. That hotel had been closed for a couple of hours, and it was only by the exercise of his authority that Mr. Dork obtained access, and a hearing from the sleepy landlord. The young man who had driven Mr. Prodder was found after considerable difficulty, and came stumbling down the servants' staircase in a semi-somnolent state to answer the constable's inquiries. He had driven the seafaring gentleman, whose name he did not know, direct to the Doncaster station, in time to catch the mail-train, which started at 12.50. He had parted

with the gentleman at the door of the station three minutes before the train started.

This was all the information that Mr. Dork could obtain. If he had been a sharp London detective, he might have made his arrangements for laying hands upon the fugitive sailor at the first station at which the train stopped; but being merely a simple rural functionary, he scratched his stubbled head, and stared at the landlord of the Reindeer in utter mental bewilderment.

"He was in a devil of a hurry, this chap," he muttered rather sulkily. "What did he want to coot away for?"

The young man who had acted as charioteer could not answer this question. He only knew that the seafaring gentleman had promised him half a sovereign if he caught the mail-train, and that he had earned his reward.

"Well, I suppose it aint so very particklar," said Mr. Dork, sipping a glass of rum, which he had ordered for his refreshment. "You'll have to appear to-morrow, and you can tell nigh as much as t'other chap," he added, turning to the young man. "You was with him when the shot were fired, and you warn't far when he found the body. You'll have to appear and give evi-

dence whenever the inquest's held. I doubt if it'll be to-morrow: for there won't be much time to give notice to the coroner."

Mr. Dork wrote the young man's name in his pocket-book, and the landlord vouched for his being forthcoming when called upon. Having done thus much, the constable left the inn, after drinking another glass of rum, and refreshing John Mellish's horse with a handful of oats and a drink of water. He drove at a brisk pace back to the Park stables, delivered the horse and gig to the lad who had waited for his coming, and returned to his comfortable dwelling in the village of Meslingham, about a mile from the Park gates.

I scarcely know how to describe that long, quiet, miserable day which succeeded the night of the murder Aurora Mellish lay in a dull stupor, not able to lift her head from the pillows upon which it rested, scarcely caring to raise her eyelids from the aching eyes they sheltered. She was not ill, nor did she affect to be ill. She lay upon the sofa in her dressing-room, attended by her maid, and visited at intervals by John, who roamed hither and thither about the house and grounds, talking to innumerable people, and

always coming to the same conclusion, namely, that the whole affair was a horrible mystery, and that he heartily wished the inquest well over. He had visitors from twenty miles round his house, —for the evil news had spread far and wide before noon,—visitors who came to condole and to sympathize, and wonder, and speculate, and ask questions, until they fairly drove him mad. But he bore all very patiently. He could tell them nothing except that the business was as dark a mystery to him as it could be to them, and that he had no hope of finding any solution to the ghastly enigma. They one and all asked him the same question: "Had any one a motive for killing this man?"

How could he answer them? He might have told them that if twenty persons had had a powerful motive for killing James Conyers, it was possible that a one-and-twentieth person who had no motive might have done the deed. That species of argument which builds up any hypothesis out of a series of probabilities may, after all, lead very often to false conclusions.

Mr. Mellish did not attempt to argue the question. He was too weary and sick at heart,

too anxious for the inquest to be over, and be free to carry Aurora away with him, and turn his back upon the familiar place, which had been hateful to him ever since the trainer had crossed its threshold.

"Yes, my darling," he said to his wife, as he bent over her pillow, "I shall take you away to the south of France directly this business is settled. You shall leave the scene of all past associations, all bygone annoyances. We will begin the world afresh."

"God grant that we may be able to do so," Aurora answered gravely. "Ah, my dear, I cannot tell you that I am sorry for this man's death. If he had died nearly two years ago, when I thought he did, how much misery he would have saved me!"

Once in the course of that long summer's afternoon Mr. Mellish walked across the park to the cottage at the north gates. He could not repress a morbid desire to look upon the lifeless clay of the man whose presence had caused him such vague disquietude, such instinctive terror. He found the "Softy" leaning on the gate of the little garden, and one of the grooms standing at the door of the death-chamber.

"The inquest is to be held at the Golden Lion,

at ten o'clock to-morrow morning," Mr. Mellish said to the men. "You, Hargraves, will be wanted as a witness."

He walked into the darkened chamber. The groom understood what he came for, and silently withdrew the white drapery that covered the trainer's dead face.

Accustomed hands had done their awful duty. The strong limbs had been straightened. The lower jaw, which had dropped in the agony of sudden death, was supported by a linen bandage; the eyelids were closed over the dark-violet eyes; and the face, which had been beautiful in life, was even yet more beautiful in the still solemnity of death. The clay which in life had lacked so much, in its lack of a beautiful soul to light it from within, found its level in death. The worthless soul was gone, and the physical perfection that remained had lost its only blemish. The harmony of proportion, the exquisitely-modelled features, the charms of detail,—all were left; and the face which James Conyers carried to the grave was handsomer than that which had smiled insolent defiance upon the world in the trainer's lifetime..

John Mellish stood for some minutes looking gravely at that marble face.

"Poor fellow!" thought the generous-hearted young squire; "it was a hard thing to die so young. I wish he had never come here. I wish Lolly had confided in me, and let me made a bargain with this man to stop away and keep her secret. Her secret! her father's secret more likely. What secret could she have had, that a groom was likely to discover? It may have been some mercantile business, some commercial transaction of Archibald Floyd's, by which the old man fell into his servant's power. It would be only like my glorious Aurora, to take the burden upon her own shoulders, and to bear it bravely through every trial."

It was thus that John Mellish had often reasoned upon the mystery which divided him from his wife. He could not bear to impute even the shadow of evil to her. He could not endure to think of her as a poor helpless woman entrapped into the power of a mean-spirited hireling, who was only too willing to make his market out of her secrets. He could not tolerate such an idea as this; and he sacrificed poor Archibald

Floyd's commercial integrity for the preservation of Aurora's womanly dignity. Ah, how weak and imperfect a passion is this boundless love! How ready to sacrifice others for that one loved object, which *must* be kept spotless in our imaginations, though a hecatomb of her fellow-creatures are to be blackened and befouled for her justification! If Othello could have established Desdemona's purity by the sacrifice of the reputation of every lady in Cyprus, do you think he would have spared the fair inhabitants of the friendly isle? No; he would have branded every one of them with infamy, if he could by so doing have rehabilitated the wife he loved. John Mellish *would* not think ill of his wife. He resolutely shut his eyes to all damning evidence. He clung with a desperate tenacity to his belief in her purity, and only clung the more tenaciously as the proofs against her became more numerous.

The inquest was held at a road-side inn, within a quarter of a mile of the north gates—a quiet little place, only frequented on market-days by the country people going backwards and forwards between Doncaster and the villages beyond Meslingham. The coroner and his jury

sat in a long bare room, in which the frequenters of the Golden Lion were wont to play bowls in wet weather. The surgeon, Steeve Hargraves, Jarvis, the young man from the Reindeer, William Dork the constable, and Mr. Mellish, were the only witnesses called: but Colonel Maddison and Mr. Lofthouse were both present during the brief proceedings.

The inquiry into the circumstances of the trainer's death occupied a very short time. Nothing was elicited by the brief examination of the witnesses which in any way led to the elucidation of the mystery. John Mellish was the last person interrogated, and he answered the questions put to him with prompt decision. There was one inquiry, however, which he was unable to answer, although it was a very simple one. Mr. Hayward, the coroner, anxious to discover so much of the history of the dead man as might lead eventually to the discovery of his murderer, asked Mr. Mellish if his trainer had been a bachelor or a married man.

"I really cannot answer that question," said John; "I should imagine that he was a single man, as neither he nor Mr. Pastern told me any-

thing to the contrary. Had he been married, he would have brought his wife with him, I should suppose. My trainer, Langley, was married when he entered my service, and his wife and children have occupied the premises over my stables for some years."

"You infer, then, that James Conyers was unmarried?"

"Most decidedly."

"And it is your opinion that he had made no enemies in the neighbourhood?"

"It is next to impossible that he could have done so."

"To what cause, then, do you attribute his death?"

"To an unhappy accident. I can account for it in no other way. The path through the wood is used as a public thoroughfare, and the whole of the plantation is known to be infested with poachers. It was past ten o'clock at night when the shot was heard. I should imagine that it was fired by a poacher whose eyes deceived him in the shadowy light."

The coroner shook his head. "You forget, Mr. Mellish," he said, "that the cause of death was not

an ordinary gun-shot wound. The shot heard was the report of a pistol, and the deceased was killed by a pistol-bullet."

John Mellish was silent. He had spoken in good faith as to his impression respecting the cause of the trainer's death. In the press and hurry, the horror and confusion of the two last days, the smaller details of the awful event had escaped his memory.

"Do you know any one amongst your servants, Mr. Mellish," asked the coroner, "whom you would consider likely to commit an act of violence of this kind? Have you any one of an especially vindictive character in your household?"

"No," answered John, decisively; "I can answer for my servants as I would for myself. They were all strangers to this man. What motive could they possibly have had to seek his death?"

Mr. Hayward rubbed his chin, and shook his head reflectively.

"There was this superannuated trainer whom you spoke of just now, Mr. Mellish," he said. "I am well aware that the post of trainer in your

stables is rather a good thing. A man may save a good deal of money out of his wages and perquisites with such a master as you. This former trainer may not have liked being superseded by the deceased. He may have felt some animus towards his successor."

"Langley!" cried John Mellish; "he is as good a fellow as ever breathed. He was not superseded; he resigned the active part of his work at his own wish, and he retained his full wages by mine. The poor fellow has been confined to his bed for the last week."

"Humph," muttered the coroner. "Then you can throw no light upon this business, Mr. Mellish?"

"None whatever. I have written to Mr. Pastern, in whose stables the deceased was employed, telling him of the circumstances of the trainer's death, and begging him to forward the information to any relative of the murdered man. I expect an answer by to-morrow's post; and I shall be happy to submit that answer to you."

Prior to the examination of the witnesses, the jurymen had been conducted to the north lodge, where they had beheld the mortal remains of

James Conyers. Mr. Morton had accompanied them, and had endeavoured to explain to them the direction which the bullet had taken, and the manner in which, according to his own idea, the shot must have been fired. The jurymen who had been empannelled to decide upon this awful question were simple agriculturists and petty tradesmen, who grudged the day's lost labour, and who were ready to accept any solution of the mystery which might be suggested to them by the coroner. They hurried back to the Golden Lion, listened deferentially to the evidence and to Mr. Hayward's address, retired to an adjoining apartment, where they remained in consultation for the space of about five minutes, and whence they emerged with a very rambling form of decision, which Mr. Hayward reduced into a verdict of wilful murder against some person or persons unknown.

Very little had been said about the disappearance of the seafaring man who had carried the tidings of the murder to Mr. Mellish's house. Nobody for a moment imagined that the evidence of this missing witness might have thrown some ray of light upon the mystery of the trainer's

death. The seafaring man had been engaged in conversation with the young man from the Reindeer at the time when the shot was fired; he was therefore not the actual murderer; and strangely significant as his hurried flight might have been to the acute intelligence of a well-trained metropolitan police-officer, no one amongst the rustic officials present at the inquest attached any importance to the circumstance. Nor had Aurora's name been once mentioned during the brief proceedings. Nothing had transpired which in any way revealed her previous acquaintance with James Conyers; and John Mellish drew a deep breath, a long sigh of relief, as he left the Golden Lion and walked homewards. Colonel Maddison, Mr. Lofthouse, and two or three other gentlemen lingered on the threshold of the little inn, talking to Mr. Hayward, the coroner.

The inquest was terminated; the business was settled; and the mortal remains of James Conyers could be carried to the grave at the pleasure of his late employer. All was over. The mystery of death and the secrets of life would be buried peacefully in the grave of the murdered man; and John Mellish was free to carry his wife away

with him whithersoever he would. Free, have I said? No; for ever and for ever the shadow of that bygone mystery would hang like a funeral pall between himself and the woman he loved. For ever and for ever the recollection of that ghastly undiscovered problem would haunt him in sleeping and in waking, in the sunlight and in the darkness. His nobler nature, triumphing again and again over the subtle influences of damning suggestions and doubtful facts, was again and again shaken, although never quite defeated. He fought the battle bravely, though it was a very hard one, and it was to endure perhaps to the end of time. That voiceless argument was for ever to be argued; the spirits of Faith and Infidelity were for ever to be warring with each other in that tortured breast, until the end of life; until he died, perhaps, with his head lying upon his wife's bosom, with his cheek fanned by her warm breath; but ignorant to the very last of the real nature of that dark something, that nameless and formless horror with which he had wrestled so patiently and so long.

"I'll take her away with me," he thought; "and when we are divided by a thousand miles of

blue water from the scene of her secret, I will fall on my knees before her, and beseech her to confide in me."

He passed by the north lodge with a shudder, and walked straight along the high road towards the principal entrance of the Park. He was close to the gates when he heard a voice, a strange suppressed voice, calling feebly to him to stop. He turned round and saw the "Softy" making his way towards him with a slow, shambling run. Of all human beings, except perhaps that one who now lay cold and motionless in the darkened chamber at the north lodge, this Steeve Hargraves was the last whom Mr. Mellish cared to see. He turned with an angry frown upon the "Softy," who was wiping the perspiration from his pale face with the ragged end of his neck-handkerchief, and panting hoarsely.

"What is the matter?" asked John. "What do you want with me?"

"It's th' coroner," gasped Stephen Hargraves, —"th' coroner and Mr. Lofthouse, th' parson. They want to speak to ye, sir, oop at the Loion."

"What about?"

Steeve Hargraves gave a ghastly grin.

"I doan't know, sir," he whispered. "It's hardly loikely they'd tell me. There's summat oop, though, I'll lay; for Mr. Lofthouse was as whoite as ashes, and seemed strangely oopset about summat. Would you be pleased to step oop and speak to 'un directly, sir?—that was my message."

"Yes, yes; I'll go," answered John absently.

He had taken his hat off, and was passing his hand over his hot forehead in a half-bewildered manner. He turned his back upon the "Softy," and walked rapidly away, retracing his steps in the direction of the roadside inn.

Stephen Hargraves stood staring after him until he was out of sight, and then turned and walked on slowly towards the turnstile leading into the wood.

"*I* know what they've found," he muttered; "and *I* know what they want with him. He'll be some time oop there; so I'll slip across the wood and tell her. Yes,"—he paused, rubbing his hands, and laughing a slow voiceless laugh, which distorted his ugly face, and made him horrible to look upon,—"yes, it will be nuts for me to tell her."

CHAPTER II.

"MY WIFE! MY WIFE! WHAT WIFE? I HAVE NO WIFE."

THE Golden Lion had reassumed its accustomed air of rustic tranquillity when John Mellish returned to it. The jurymen had gone back to their different avocations, glad to have finished the business so easily; the villagers, who had hung about the inn to hear what they could of the proceedings, were all dispersed; and the landlord was eating his dinner, with his wife and family, in the comfortable little bar-parlour. He put down his knife and fork as John entered the sanded bar, and left his meal to receive such a distinguished visitor.

"Mr. Hayward and Mr. Lofthouse are in the coffee-room, sir," he said. "Will you please to step this way?"

He opened the door of a carpeted room, fur-

nished with shining mahogany tables, and adorned by half a dozen gaudily-coloured prints of the Doncaster meetings, the great match between Voltigeur and Flying Dutchman, and other events which had won celebrity for the northern race-course. The coroner was sitting at the bottom of one of the long tables, with Mr. Lofthouse standing near him. William Dork, the Meslingham constable, stood near the door, with his hat in his hand, and with rather an alarmed expression dimly visible in his ruddy face. Mr. Hayward and Mr. Lofthouse were both very pale.

One rapid glance was enough to show all this to John Mellish,—enough to show him this, and something more: a basin of blood-stained water before the coroner, and an oblong piece of wet paper, which lay under Mr. Hayward's clenched hand.

"What is the matter? Why did you send for me?" John asked.

Bewildered and alarmed as he had been by the message which had summoned him hurriedly back to the inn, he was still more so by the confusion evident in the coroner's manner as he answered this question.

"Pray sit down, Mr. Mellish," he said. "I—I—sent for you—at—the—the advice of Mr. Lofthouse, who—who, as a clergyman and a family man, thought it incumbent upon me——"

Reginald Lofthouse laid his hand upon the coroner's arm with a warning gesture. Mr. Hayward stopped for a moment, cleared his throat, and then continued speaking, but in an altered tone.

"I have had occasion to reprehend William Dork for a breach of duty, which, though I am aware it may have been, as he says, purely unintentional and accidental——"

"It was indeed, sir," muttered the constable submissively. "If I'd ha' know'd——"

"The fact is, Mr. Mellish, that on the night of the murder, Dork, in examining the clothes of the deceased, discovered a paper, which had been concealed by the unhappy man between the outer material and the lining of his waistcoat. This paper was so stained by the blood in which the breast of the waistcoat was absolutely saturated, that Dork was unable to decipher a word of its contents. He therefore was quite unaware of the importance of the paper; and, in the hurry and

confusion consequent on the very hard duty he has done for the last two days, he forgot to produce it at the inquest. He had occasion to make some memorandum in his pocket-book almost immediately after the verdict had been given, and this circumstance recalled to his mind the existence of the paper. He came immediately to me, and consulted me upon this very awkward business. I examined the document, washed away a considerable portion of the stains which had rendered it illegible, and have contrived to decipher the greater part of it."

"The document is of some importance, then?" John asked.

He sat at a little distance from the table, with his head bent and his fingers rattling nervously against the side of his chair. He chafed horribly at the coroner's pompous slowness. He suffered an agony of fear and bewilderment. Why had they called him back? What was this paper? How *could* it concern him?

"Yes," Mr. Hayward answered; "the document is certainly an important one. I have shown it to Mr. Lofthouse, for the purpose of taking his advice upon the subject. I have not shown it to

Dork; but I detained Dork in order that you may hear from him how and where the paper was found, and why it was not produced at the inquest."

"Why should I ask any questions upon the subject?" cried John, lifting his head suddenly, and looking from the coroner to the clergyman. "How should this paper concern me?"

"I regret to say that it does concern you very materially, Mr. Mellish," the rector answered gently.

John's angry spirit revolted against that gentleness. What right had they to speak to him like this? Why did they look at him with those grave, pitying faces? Why did they drop their voices to that horrible tone in which the bearers of evil tidings pave their way to the announcement of some overwhelming calamity?

"Let me see this paper, then, if it concerns me," John said very carelessly. "Oh, my God!" he thought, "what is this misery that is coming upon me? What is this hideous avalanche of trouble which is slowly descending to crush me?"

"You do not wish to hear anything from Dork?" asked the coroner.

"No, no!" cried John savagely. "I only want to see that paper." He pointed as he spoke to the wet and blood-stained document under Mr. Hayward's hand.

"You may go, then, Dork," the coroner said quietly; "and be sure you do not mention this business to any one. It is a matter of purely private interest, and has no reference to the murder. You will remember?"

"Yes, sir."

The constable bowed respectfully to the three gentlemen and left the room. He was very glad to be so well out of the business.

"They needn't have *called* me," he thought. (To *call*, in the northern *patois*, is to scold, to abuse.) "They needn't have said it was repri—what's its name—to keep the paper. I might have burnt it, if I'd liked, and said naught about it."

"Now," said John, rising and walking to the table as the door closed upon the constable, "now then, Mr. Hayward, let me see this paper. If it concerns me, or any one connected with me, I have a right to see it."

"A right which I will not dispute," the coroner answered gravely, as he handed the blood-stained

document to Mr. Mellish. "I only beg you to believe in my heartfelt sympathy with you in this——"

"Let me alone!" cried John, waving the speaker away from him as he snatched the paper from his hand; "let me alone! Can't you see that I'm nearly mad?"

He walked to the window, and with his back to the coroner and Mr. Lofthouse, examined the blotched and blotted document in his hands. He stared for a long time at those blurred and half-illegible lines before he became aware of their full meaning. But at last the signification of that miserable paper grew clear to him, and with a loud cry of anguish he dropped into the chair from which he had risen, and covered his face with his strong right hand. He held the paper in the left, crumpled and crushed by the convulsive pressure of his grasp.

"My God!" he ejaculated, after that first cry of anguish,—"my God! I never thought of this. I never could have imagined this."

Neither the coroner nor the clergyman spoke. What could they say to him? Sympathetic words could have no power to lessen such a grief

as this; they would only fret and harass the strong man in his agony; it was better to obey him; it was far better to let him alone.

He rose at last, after a silence that seemed long to the spectators of his grief.

"Gentlemen," he said, in a loud, resolute voice that resounded through the little room, "I give you my solemn word of honour that when Archibald Floyd's daughter married me, she believed this man, James Conyers, to be dead."

He struck his clenched first upon the table, and looked with proud defiance at the two men. Then, with his left hand, the hand that grasped the blood-stained paper, thrust into his breast, he walked out of the room. He walked out of the room and out of the house, but not homewards. A grassy lane, opposite the Golden Lion, led away to a great waste of brown turf, called Harper's Common. John Mellish walked slowly along this lane, and out upon this quiet common-land, lonely even in the broad summer daylight. As he closed the five-barred gate at the end of the lane, and emerged upon the open waste, he seemed to shut the door of the world that lay behind him, and to stand alone with his great

grief, under the low, sunless, summer sky. The dreary scene before him, and the gray atmosphere above his head, seemed in strange harmony with his grief. The reedy water-pools, unbroken by a ripple; the barren verdure, burnt a dull grayish brown by the summer sun; the bloomless heather, and the flowerless rushes,—all things upon which he looked took a dismal colouring from his own desolation, and seemed to make him the more desolate. The spoiled child of fortune,—the popular young squire, who had never been contradicted in nearly two-and-thirty years,—the happy husband, whose pride in his wife had touched upon that narrow boundary-line which separates the sublime from the ridiculous,—ah! whither had they fled, all these shadows of the happy days that were gone? They had vanished away; they had fallen into the black gulf of the cruel past. The monster who devours his children had taken back these happy ones, and a desolate man was left in their stead. A desolate man, who looked at a broad ditch and a rushy bank, a few paces from where he stood, and thought, "Was it I who leapt that dike a month ago to gather forget-me-nots for my wife?"

He asked himself that question, reader, which we must all ask ourselves sometimes. Was he really that creature of the irrecoverable past? Even as I write this, I can see that common-land of which I write. The low sky, the sunburnt grass, the reedy water-pools, the flat landscape stretching far away on every side to regions that are strange to me. I can recall every object in that simple scene,—the atmosphere of the sunless day, the sounds in the soft summer air, the voices of the people near me; I can recall everything except—*myself*. This miserable *ego* is the one thing that I cannot bring back; the one thing that seems strange to me; the one thing that I can scarcely believe in. If I went back to that northern common-land to-morrow, I should recognize every hillock, every scrap of furze, or patch of heather. The few years that have gone by since I saw it will have made a scarcely perceptible difference in the features of the familiar place. The slow changes of nature, immutable in her harmonious law, will have done their work according to that unalterable law; but this wretched me has undergone so complete a change, that if you could bring me back that *alter ego* of the past,

I should be unable to recognize the strange creature; and yet it is by no volcanic shocks, no rending asunder of rocky masses, no great convulsions, or terrific agonies of nature, that the change has come about; it is rather by a slow, monotonous wearing away of salient points; an imperceptible adulteration of this or that constituent part; an addition here, and a subtraction there, that the transformation takes place. It is hard to make a man believe in the physiologists, who declare that the hand which uses his pen to-day is not the same hand that guided the quill with which he wrote seven years ago. He finds it very difficult to believe this; but let him take out of some forgotten writing-desk, thrust into a corner of his lumber-room, those letters which he wrote seven years ago, and which were afterwards returned to him by the lady to whom they were addressed, and the question which he will ask himself, as he reads the faded lines, will most surely be, "Was it I who wrote this bosh? Was it I who called a lady with white eyelashes 'the guiding star of a lonely life'? Was it I who was 'inexpressibly miserable' with one *s*, and looked 'forward with unutterable anxiety to the party in

Onslow Square, at which I once more should look into those soft blue eyes?' What party in Onslow Square? *Non mi recordo.* 'Those soft blue eyes' were garnished with white lashes, and the lady to whom the letters were written, jilted me, to marry a rich soap-boiler." Even the law takes cognizance of this wonderful transformation. The debt which Smith contracts in 1850 is null and void in 1857. The Smith of '50 may have been an extravagant rogue; the Smith of '57 may be a conscientious man, who would not cheat his creditors of a farthing. Shall Smith the second be called upon to pay the debts of Smith the first? I leave that question to Smith's conscience and the metaphysicians. Surely the same law should hold good in breach of promise of marriage. Smith the first may have adored Miss Brown; Smith the second may detest her. Shall Smith of 1857 be called upon to perform the contract entered into by that other Smith of 1850? The French criminal law goes still further. The murderer whose crime remains unsuspected for ten years can laugh at the police-officers who discover his guilt in the eleventh. Surely this must be because the real murderer is no longer

amenable to justice; because the hand that struck the blow, and the brain that plotted the deed, are alike vanished.

Poor John Mellish, with the world of the past crumbled at his feet, looked out at the blank future, and mourned for the people who were dead and gone.

He flung himself at full length upon the stunted grass, and taking the crumpled paper from his breast, unfolded it and smoothed it out before him.

It was a certificate of marriage. The certificate of a marriage which had been solemnized at the parish church of Dover, upon the 2nd of July, 1856, between James Conyers, bachelor, rough-rider, of London, son of Joseph Conyers, stage-coachman, and Susan, his wife, and Aurora Floyd, spinster, daughter of Archibald Floyd, banker, of Felden Woods, Kent.

CHAPTER III.

AURORA'S FLIGHT.

Mrs. Mellish sat in her husband's room on the morning of the inquest, amongst the guns and fishing-rods, the riding-boots and hunting-whips, and all the paraphernalia of sportsmanship. She sat in a capacious wicker-work arm-chair, close to the open window, with her head lying back upon the chintz-covered cushions, and her eyes wandering far away across the lawn and flower-beds towards the winding pathway by which it was likely John Mellish would return from the inquest at the Golden Lion.

She had openly defied Mrs. Powell, and had locked the door of this quiet chamber upon that lady's stereotyped civilities and sympathetic simperings. She had locked the door upon the outer world, and she sat alone in the pleasant window, the full-blown roses showering their

scented petals upon her lap with every breath of the summer breeze, and the butterflies hovering about her. The old mastiff sat by her side, with his heavy head lying on her lap, and his big dim eyes lifted to her face. She sat alone, I have said; but Heaven knows she was not companionless. Black care and corroding anxiety kept her faithful company, and would not budge from her side. What companions are so adhesive as trouble and sorrow? what associates so tenacious, what friends so watchful and untiring? This wretched girl stood alone in the centre of a sea of troubles, fearful to stretch out her hands to those who loved her, lest she should drag them into that ocean which was rising to overwhelm her.

"Oh, if I could suffer alone!" she thought; "if I could suffer all this misery alone, I think I would go through it to the last without complaining; but the shame, the degradation, the anguish, will come upon others more heavily than upon me. What will they not suffer? what will they not endure, if the wicked madness of my youth should become known to the world?"

Those others, of whose possible grief and shame

she thought with such cruel torture, were her father and John Mellish. Her love for her husband had not lessened by one iota her love for that indulgent father, on whom the folly of her girlhood had brought such bitter suffering. Her generous heart was wide enough for both. She had acknowledged no "divided duty," and would have repudiated any encroachment of the new affection upon the old. The great river of her love widened into an ocean, and embraced a new shore with its mighty tide; but that far-away source of childhood, from which affection first sprang in its soft infantine purity, still gushed in crystal beauty from its unsullied spring. She would perhaps scarcely have recognized the coldly-measured affection of mad Lear's youngest daughter—the affection which could divide itself with mathematical precision between father and husband. Surely love is too pure a sentiment to be so weighed in the balance. Must we subtract something from the original sum when we are called upon to meet a new demand? or has not affection rather some magic power by which it can double its capital at any moment when there is a run upon the bank? When Mrs. John

Anderson becomes the mother of six children, she does not say to her husband, "My dear John, I shall be compelled to rob you of six-tenths of my affection in order to provide for the little ones." No; the generous heart of the wife grows larger to meet the claims upon the mother, as the girl's heart expanded with the new affection of the wife. Every pang of grief which Aurora felt for her husband's misery was doubled by the image of her father's sorrow. She could not divide these two in her own mind. She loved them, and was sorry for them, with an equal measure of love and sorrow.

"If—if the truth should be discovered at this inquest," she thought, "I can never see my husband again; I can never look in his face any more. I will run away to the end of the world, and hide myself from him for ever."

She had tried to capitulate with her fate; she had endeavoured to escape the full measure of retribution, and she had failed. She had done evil that good might come of it, in the face of that command which says that all such evil-doing shall be wasted sin, useless iniquity. She had deceived John Mellish in the hope that the veil

of deception might never be rent in twain, that the truth might be undiscovered to the end, and the man she loved spared from cruel shame and grief. But the fruits of that foolish seed, sown long ago in the day of her disobedience, had grown up around her and hedged her in upon every side, and she had been powerless to cut a pathway for herself through the noxious weeds that her own hands had planted.

She sat with her watch in her hand, and her eyes wandered every now and then from the gardens before her to the figures on the dial. John Mellish had left the house at a little after nine o'clock, and it was now nearly two. He had told her that the inquest would be over in a couple of hours, and that he would hurry home directly it was finished, to tell her the result. What would be the result of that inquest? What inquiries might be made? what evidence might, by some unhappy accident, be produced to compromise or to betray her? She sat in a dull stupor, waiting to receive her sentence. What would it be? Condemnation or release? *If* her secret should escape detection, if James Conyers should be allowed to carry the story of his brief

married life to the grave, what relief, what release for the wretched girl, whose worst sin had been to mistake a bad man for a good one; the ignorant trustfulness of a child who is ready to accept any shabby pilgrim for an exiled nobleman or a prince in disguise!

It was half-past two, when she was startled by the sound of a shambling footstep upon the gravelled pathway underneath the verandah. The footstep slowly shuffled on for a few paces; then paused, then shuffled on again; and at last a face that she hated made itself visible at the angle of the window, opposite to that against which she sat. It was the white face of the "Softy," which was poked cautiously forward a few inches within the window-frame. The mastiff sprang up with a growl, and made as if he would have flown at that ugly leering face, which looked like one of the hideous decorations of a Gothic building; but Aurora caught the animal's collar with both her hands, and dragged him back.

"Be quiet, Bow-wow," she said; "quiet, boy, —quiet."

She still held him with one firm hand, soothing him with the other. "What do you want?" she

asked, turning upon the "Softy" with a cold icy grandeur of disdain, which made her look like Nero's wife defying her false accusers. "What do you want with me? Your master is dead, and you have no longer an excuse for coming here. You have been forbidden the house and the grounds. If you forget this another time, I shall request Mr. Mellish to remind you."

She lifted her disengaged hand and laid it upon the window-sash; she was going to draw it down, when Stephen Hargraves stopped her.

"Don't be in such a hoory," he said; "I want to speak to you. I've coom straight from th' inquest. I thought you might want to know all about it. I coom out o' friendliness, though you did pay into me with th' horsewhip."

Aurora's heart beat tempestuously against her aching breast. Ah! what hard duty that poor heart had done lately! what icy burdens it had borne, what horrible oppression of secrecy and terror had weighed upon it, crushing out all hope and peace! An agony of suspense and dread convulsed that tortured heart as the "Softy" tempted her, tempted her to ask him the issue of the inquest, that she might receive from his lips the

sentence of life or death. She little knew how much of her secret this man had discovered; but she knew that he hated her, and that he suspected enough to know his power of torturing her.

She lifted her proud head and looked at him with a steady glance of defiance. "I have told you that your presence is disagreeable," she said. "Stand aside, and let me shut the window."

The "Softy" grinned insolently, and holding the window-frame with one of his broad hands, put his head into the room. Aurora rose to leave the window; but he laid the other hand upon her wrist, which shrunk instinctively from contact with his hard horny palm.

"I tell you I've got summat particklar to say to you," he whispered. "You shall hear all about it. I was one of th' witnesses at th' inquest, and I've been hanging about ever since, and I know everything."

Aurora flung her head back disdainfully, and tried to wrench her wrist from that strong grasp.

"Let me go!" she said. "You shall suffer for this insolence when Mr. Mellish returns."

"But he won't be back just yet awhile," said the "Softy," grinning. "He's gone back to the

Golden Lion. Th' coroner and Mr. Lofthouse, th' parson, sent for him to tell him summat—*summat about you!*" hissed Mr. Stephen Hargraves, with his dry white lips close to Aurora's ear.

"What do you mean?" cried Mrs. Mellish, still writhing in the "Softy's" grasp, still restraining her dog from flying at him with her disengaged hand; "what do you mean?"

"I mean what I say," answered Steeve Hargraves; "I mean that it's all found out. They know everything; and they've sent for Mr. Mellish to tell him. They've sent for him to tell him what you was to him that's dead."

A low wail broke from Aurora's lips. She had expected to hear this, perhaps; she had, at any rate, dreaded it; she had only fought against receiving the tidings from this man; but he had conquered her; he had conquered her as the dogged obstinate nature, however base, however mean, will always conquer the generous and impulsive soul. He had secured his revenge, and had contrived to be the witness of her agony. He released her wrist as he finished speaking, and looked at her—looked at her with an insolently triumphant leer in his small eyes.

She drew herself up, proudly still, proudly and bravely in spite of all, but with her face changed —changed from its former expression of restless pain to the dull blankness of despair.

"They found th' certificate," said the "Softy." "He'd carried it about with him, sewed up in's waistco-at."

The certificate! Heaven have pity upon her girlish ignorance! She had never thought of that; she had never remembered that miserable scrap of paper which was the legal evidence of her folly. She had dreaded the presence of that husband who had arisen, as if from the grave, to pursue and torment her; but she had forgotten that other evidence of the parish register, which might also arise against her at any moment. She had feared the finding of something—some letter—some picture—some accidental record amongst the possessions of the murdered man; but she had never thought of this most conclusive evidence, this most incontrovertible proof. She put her hand to her head, trying to realize the full horror of her position. The certificate of her marriage with her father's groom was in the hands of John Mellish.

"What will he think of me?" she thought. "How would he ever believe me if I were to tell him that I had received what I thought positive evidence of James Conyers's death a year before my second marriage? How *could* he believe in me? I have deceived him too cruelly to dare to ask his confidence."

She looked about, trying to collect herself, trying to decide upon what she ought to do, and in her bewilderment and agony forgot for a moment the greedy eyes which were gloating upon her misery. But she remembered herself presently, and turning sternly upon Stephen Hargraves, spoke to him with a voice which was singularly clear and steady.

"You have told me all that you have to tell," she said; "be so good as to get out of the way while I shut the window."

The "Softy" drew back and allowed her to close the sashes; she bolted the window, and drew down the Venetian blind, effectually shutting out her spy, who crept away slowly and reluctantly towards the shrubbery, through which he could make his way safely out of the grounds.

"I've paid her out," he muttered, as he

shambled off under the shelter of the young trees; "I've paid her out pretty tidy. It's almost better than money," he said, laughing silently—"it's almost better than money to pay off them kind of debts."

Aurora seated herself at John Mellish's desk, and wrote a few hurried lines upon a sheet of paper that lay uppermost amongst letters and bills.

"My dear Love,"—she wrote,—"I cannot remain here to see you after the discovery which has been made to-day. I am a miserable coward; and I cannot meet your altered looks, I cannot hear your altered voice. I have no hope that you can have any other feeling for me than contempt and loathing. But on some future day, when I am far away from you, and the bewilderment of my present misery has grown less, I will write and explain everything. Think of me mercifully, if you can; and if you can believe that, in the wicked concealments of the last few weeks, the mainspring of my conduct has been my love for you, you will only believe the truth. God bless you, my best and truest. The pain of leaving you for ever is less than the pain of knowing that you had ceased to love me. Good-bye."

She lighted a taper, and sealed the envelope which contained this letter.

"The spies who hate and watch me shall not read this," she thought, as she wrote John's name upon the envelope.

She left the letter upon the desk, and, rising from her seat, looked round the room,—looked with a long lingering gaze, that dwelt on each familiar object. How happy she had been amongst all that masculine litter! how happy with the man she had believed to be her husband! how innocently happy before the coming down of that horrible storm-cloud which had overwhelmed them both! She turned away with a shudder.

"I have brought disgrace and misery upon all who have loved me," she thought. "If I had been less cowardly,—if I had told the truth,—all this might have been avoided, if I had confessed the truth to Talbot Bulstrode."

She paused at the mention of that name.

"I will go to Talbot," she thought. "He is a good man. I will go to him; I shall have no shame now in telling him all. He will advise me what to do; he will break this discovery to my poor father."

Aurora had dimly foreseen this misery when she had spoken to Lucy Bulstrode at Felden; she had dimly foreseen a day in which all would be discovered, and she would fly to Lucy to ask for a shelter.

She looked at her watch.

"A quarter past three," she said. "There is an express that leaves Doncaster at five. I could walk the distance in the time."

She unlocked the door, and ran up-stairs to her own rooms. There was no one in the dressing-room; but her maid was in the bedroom, arranging some dresses in a huge wardrobe.

Aurora selected her plainest bonnet and a large gray cloak, and quietly put them on before the cheval glass in one of the pretty French windows. The maid, busy with her own work, did not take any particular notice of her mistress's actions; for Mrs. Mellish was accustomed to wait upon herself, and disliked any officious attention.

"How pretty the rooms look!" Aurora thought, with a weary sigh; "how simple and countrified! It was for *me* that the new furniture was chosen,—for me that the bath-room and conservatory were built."

She looked through the vista of brightly-carpeted rooms.

Would they ever seem as cheerful as they had once done to their master? Would he still occupy them, or would he lock the doors, and turn his back upon the old house in which he had lived such an untroubled life for nearly two-and-thirty years?

"My poor boy, my poor boy!" she thought. "Why was I ever born to bring such sorrow upon him?"

There was no egotism in her sorrow for his grief. She knew that he had loved her, and she knew that his parting would be the bitterest agony of his life; but in the depth of mortification which her own womanly pride had undergone, she could not look beyond the present shame of the discovery made that day, to a future of happiness and release.

"He will believe that I never loved him," she thought. "He will believe that he was the dupe of a designing woman, who wished to regain the position she had lost. What will he not think of me that is base and horrible?"

The face which she saw in the glass was very

pale and rigid; the large dark eyes dry and lustrous, the lips drawn tightly down over the white teeth.

"I look like a woman who could cut her throat in such a crisis as this," she thought. "How often I have wondered at the desperate deeds done by women! I shall never wonder again."

She unlocked her dressing-case, and took a couple of bank-notes and some loose gold from one of the drawers. She put these in her purse, gathered her cloak about her, and walked towards the door.

She paused on the threshold to speak to her maid, who was still busy in the inner room.

"I am going into the garden, Parsons," she said; "tell Mr. Mellish that there is a letter for him in his study."

The room in which John kept his boots and racing accounts was called a "study" by the respectful household.

The dog Bow-wow lifted himself lazily from his tiger-skin rug as Aurora crossed the hall, and came sniffing about her, and endeavoured to follow her out of the house. But she ordered him back to his rug, and the submissive animal

obeyed her, as he had often done in his youth, when his young mistress used to throw her doll into the water at Felden, and send the faithful mastiff to rescue that fair-haired waxen favourite. He obeyed her now, but a little reluctantly; and he watched her suspiciously as she descended the flight of steps before the door.

She walked at a rapid pace across the lawn, and into the shrubbery, going steadily southwards, though by that means she made her journey longer; for the north lodge lay towards Doncaster. In her way through the shrubbery she met two people, who walked closely side by side, engrossed in a whispering conversation, and who both started and changed countenance at seeing her. These two people were the "Softy" and Mrs. Powell.

"So," she thought, as she passed this strangely-matched pair, "my two enemies are laying their heads together to plot my misery. It is time that I left Mellish Park."

She went out of a little gate, leading into some meadows. Beyond these meadows there was a long shady lane that led behind the house to Doncaster. It was a path rarely chosen by any of

the household at the Park, as it was the longest way to the town.

Aurora stopped at about a mile from the house which had been her own, and looked back at the picturesque pile of building, half hidden under the luxuriant growth of a couple of centuries.

"Good-bye, dear home, in which I was an impostor and a cheat," she said; "good-bye, for ever and for ever, my own dear love."

While Aurora uttered these few words of passionate farewell, John Mellish lay upon the sun-burnt grass, staring absently at the still water-pools under the gray sky,—pitying her, praying for her, and forgiving her from the depth of his honest heart.

CHAPTER IV.

JOHN MELLISH FINDS HIS HOME DESOLATE.

The sun was low in the western sky, and distant village clocks had struck seven, when John Mellish walked slowly away from that lonely waste of stunted grass called Harper's Common, and strolled homewards in the peaceful evening.

The Yorkshire squire was still very pale. He walked with his head bent forward upon his breast, and the hand that grasped the crumpled paper thrust into the bosom of his waistcoat; but a hopeful light shone in his eyes, and the rigid lines of his mouth had relaxed into a tender smile —a smile of love and forgiveness. Yes, he had prayed for her and forgiven her, and he was at peace. He had pleaded her cause a hundred times in the dull quiet of that summer's afternoon, and had excused her and forgiven her. Not lightly, Heaven is a witness; not without a sharp

and cruel struggle, that had rent his heart with tortures undreamed of before.

This revelation of the past was such bitter shame to him; such horrible degradation; such irrevocable infamy. His love, his idol, his empress, his goddess—it was of her he thought. By what hellish witchcraft had she been ensnared into the degrading alliance, recorded in this miserable scrap of paper? The pride of five unsullied centuries arose, fierce and ungovernable, in the breast of the country gentleman, to resent this outrage upon the woman he loved. O God! had all his glorification of her been the vain-boasting of a fool who had not known what he talked about? He was answerable to the world for the past as well as for the present. He had made an altar for his idol, and had cried aloud to all who came near her, to kneel down and perform their worship at her shrine; and he was answerable to these people for the purity of their divinity. He could not think of her as less than the idol which his love had made her—perfect, unsullied, unassailable. Disgrace, where she was concerned, knew in his mind no degrees.

It was not his own humiliation he thought of

when his face grew hot as he imagined the talk there would be in the country if this fatal indiscretion of Aurora's youth ever became generally known; it was the thought of her shame that stung him to the heart. He never once disturbed himself with any prevision of the ridicule which was likely to fall upon himself.

It was here that John Mellish and Talbot Bulstrode were so widely different in their manner of loving and suffering. Talbot had sought a wife who should reflect honour upon himself, and had fallen away from Aurora at the first trial of his faith, shaken with horrible apprehensions of his own danger. But John Mellish had submerged his very identity into that of the woman he loved. She was his faith and his worship, and it was for her departed glory that he wept in this cruel day of shame. The wrong which he found so hard to forgive was not her wrong against him; but that other and more fatal wrong against herself. I have said that his affection was universal, and partook of all the highest attributes of that sublime self-abnegation which we call Love. The agony which he felt to-day was the agony which Archibald Floyd had suffered years before. It was vicarious torture,

endured for Aurora, and not for himself; and in his struggle against that sorrowful anger which he felt for her folly, every one of her perfections took up arms upon the side of indignation, and fought against their own mistress. Had she been less beautiful, less queenly, less generous, great and noble, he might have forgiven her that self-inflicted shame more easily. But she was so perfect; and how could she, how could she?

He unfolded the wretched paper half a dozen times, and read and re-read every word of that commonplace legal document, before he could convince himself that it was not some vile forgery, concocted by James Conyers for purposes of extortion. But he prayed for her, and forgave her. He pitied her with more than a mother's tender pity, with more than a sorrowful father's anguish.

"My poor dear!" he said, "my poor dear! she was only a school-girl when this certificate was first written: an innocent child; ready to believe in any lies told her by a villain."

A dark frown obscured the Yorkshireman's brow as he thought this; a frown that would have promised no good to Mr. James Conyers, had not

the trainer passed out of the reach of all earthly good and evil.

"Will God have mercy upon a wretch like that?" thought John Mellish; "will that man be forgiven for having brought disgrace and misery upon a trusting girl?"

It will perhaps be wondered at, that John Mellish, who suffered his servants to rule in his household, and allowed his butler to dictate to him what wines he should drink; who talked freely to his grooms, and bade his trainer sit in his presence,—it will be wondered at, perhaps, that this frank, free-spoken, simple-mannered young man should have felt so bitterly the shame of Aurora's unequal marriage. It was a common saying in Doncaster, that Squire Mellish of the Park had no pride; that he would clap poor folks on the shoulder and give them good-day as he lounged in the quiet street; that he would sit upon the cornchandler's counter, slashing his hunting-whip upon those popular tops, about which a legend was current, to the effect that they were always cleaned with champagne,—and discussing the prospects of the September Meeting; and that there was not within the three Ridings, a better

landlord or a nobler-hearted gentleman. And all this was perfectly true. John Mellish was entirely without personal pride; but there was another pride, which was wholly inseparable from his education and position, and this was the pride of caste. He was strictly conservative; and although he was ready to talk to his good friend the saddler, or his trusted retainer the groom, as freely as he would have held converse with his equals, he would have opposed all the strength of his authority against the saddler had that honest tradesman attempted to stand for his native town, and would have annihilated the groom with one angry flash of his bright blue eyes had the servant infringed by so much as an inch upon the broad extent of territory that separated him from his master.

The struggle was finished before John Mellish arose from the brown turf and turned towards the home which he had left early that morning, ignorant of the great trouble that was to fall upon him, and only dimly conscious of some dark foreboding of the coming of an unknown horror. The struggle was over, and there was now only hope in his heart—the hope of clasping his wife to

his breast, and comforting her for all the past. However bitterly he might feel the humiliation of this madness of her ignorant girlhood, it was not for him to remind her of it; his duty was to confront the world's slander or the world's ridicule, and oppose his own breast to the storm, while she was shielded by the great shelter of his love. His heart yearned for some peaceful foreign land, in which his idol would be far away from all who could tell her secret, and where she might reign once more glorious and unapproachable. He was ready to impose any cheat upon the world, in his greediness of praise and worship for her—for her. How tenderly he thought of her, walking slowly homewards in that tranquil evening! He thought of her waiting to hear from him the issue of the inquest, and he reproached himself for his neglect when he remembered how long he had been absent.

"But my darling will scarcely be uneasy," he thought; "she will hear all about the inquest from some one or other, and she will think that I have gone into Doncaster on business. She will know nothing of the finding of this detestable certificate. No one need know of it. Lofthouse

and Hayward are honourable men, and they will keep my poor girl's secret; they will keep the secret of her foolish youth,—my poor, poor girl!"

He longed for that moment which he fancied so near; the moment in which he should fold her in his arms and say, "My dearest one, be at peace; there is no longer any secret between us. Henceforth your sorrows are my sorrows, and it is hard if I cannot help you to carry the load lightly. We are one, my dear. For the first time since our wedding-day, we are truly united."

He expected to find Aurora in his own room, for she had declared her intention of sitting there all day; and he ran across the broad lawn to the rose-shadowed verandah that sheltered his favourite retreat. The blind was drawn down and the window bolted, as Aurora had bolted it in her wish to exclude Mr. Stephen Hargraves. He knocked at the window, but there was no answer.

"Lolly has grown tired of waiting," he thought.

The second dinner-bell rang in the hall while Mr. Mellish lingered outside this darkened window. The commonplace sound reminded him of his social duties.

"I must wait till dinner is over, I suppose,

before I talk to my darling," he thought. "I must go through all the usual business, for the edification of Mrs. Powell and the servants, before I can take my darling to my breast, and set her mind at ease for ever."

John Mellish submitted himself to the indisputable force of those ceremonial laws which we have made our masters, and he was prepared to eat a dinner for which he had no appetite, and wait two hours for that moment for whose coming his soul yearned, rather than provoke Mrs. Powell's curiosity by any deviation from the common course of events.

The windows of the drawing-room were open, and he saw the glimmer of a pale muslin dress at one of them. It belonged to Mrs. Powell, who was sitting in a contemplative attitude, gazing at the evening sky.

She was not thinking of that western glory of pale crimson and shining gold. She was thinking that if John Mellish cast off the wife who had deceived him, and who had never legally been his wife, the Yorkshire mansion would be a fine place to live in; a fine place for a housekeeper who knew how to obtain influence over her master,

and who had the secret of his married life and his wife's disgrace to help her on to power.

"He's such a blind, besotted fool about her," thought the ensign's widow, "that if he breaks with her to-morrow, he'll go on loving her just the same, and he'll do anything to keep her secret. Let it work which way it will, they're in my power —they're both in my power; and I'm no longer a poor dependent, to be sent away, at a quarter's notice, when it pleases them to be tired of me."

The bread of dependence is not a pleasant diet; but there are many ways of eating the same food. Mrs. Powell's habit was to receive all favours grudgingly, as she would have given, had it been her lot to give instead of to receive. She measured others by her own narrow gauge, and was powerless to comprehend or believe in the frank impulses of a generous nature. She knew that she was a useless member of poor John's household, and that the young squire could have easily dispensed with her presence. She knew, in short, that she was retained by reason of Aurora's pity for her friendlessness; and having neither gratitude nor kindly feelings to give in return for her comfortable shelter, she resented her own poverty of nature,

and hated her entertainers for their generosity. It is a property of these narrow natures so to resent the attributes they can envy, but cannot even understand; and Mrs. Powell had been far more at ease in households in which she had been treated as a lady-like drudge than she had ever been at Mellish Park, where she was received as an equal and a guest. She had eaten the bitter bread upon which she had lived so long in a bitter spirit; and her whole nature had turned to gall from the influence of that disagreeable diet. A moderately-generous person can bestow a favour, and bestow it well; but to receive a boon with perfect grace requires a far nobler and more generous nature.

John Mellish approached the open window at which the ensign's widow was seated, and looked into the room. Aurora was not there. The long saloon seemed empty and desolate. The decorations of the temple looked cold and dreary, for the deity was absent.

"No one here!" exclaimed Mr. Mellish, disconsolately.

"No one here but me," murmured Mrs. Powell, with an accent of mild deprecation.

"But where is my wife, ma'am?"

He said those two small words, "my wife," with such a tone of resolute defiance, that Mrs. Powell looked up at him as he spoke, and thought, "He has seen the certificate."

"Where is Aurora?" repeated John.

"I believe that Mrs. Mellish has gone out."

"Gone out! where?"

"You forget, sir," said the ensign's widow reproachfully,—"you appear to forget your special request that I should abstain from all supervision of Mrs. Mellish's arrangements. Prior to that request, which I may venture to suggest was unnecessarily emphatic, I had certainly considered myself, as the humble individual chosen by Miss Floyd's aunt, and invested by her with a species of authority over the young lady's actions, in some manner responsible for——"

John Mellish chafed horribly under the merciless stream of long words, which Mrs. Powell poured upon his head.

"Talk about that another time, for Heaven's sake, ma'am," he said impatiently. "I only want to know where my wife is. Two words will tell me that, I suppose?"

"I am sorry to say that I am unable to afford you any information upon that subject," answered Mrs. Powell; "Mrs. Mellish quitted the house at half-past three o'clock, dressed for walking. I have not seen her since."

Heaven forgive Aurora for the trouble it had been her lot to bring upon those who best loved her! John's heart grew sick with terror at this first failure of his hope. He had pictured her waiting to receive him, ready to fall upon his breast in answer to his passionate cry, "Aurora, come! come, dear love! the secret has been discovered, and is forgiven."

"Somebody knows where my wife has gone, I suppose, Mrs. Powell?" he said fiercely, turning upon the ensign's widow in his wrathful sense of disappointment and alarm. He was only a big child, after all, with a child's alternate hopefulness and despair; with a child's passionate devotion for those he loved, and ignorant terror of danger to those beloved ones.

"Mrs. Mellish may have made a confidante of Parsons," replied the ensign's widow; "but she certainly did not enlighten *me* as to her intended movements. Shall I ring the bell for Parsons?"

"If you please."

John Mellish stood upon the threshold of the French window, not caring to enter the handsome chamber of which he was the master. Why should he go into the house? It was no home for him without the woman who had made it so dear and sacred; dear, even in the darkest hour of sorrow and anxiety; sacred, even in despite of the trouble his love had brought upon him.

The maid Parsons appeared in answer to a message sent by Mrs. Powell; and John strode into the room and interrogated her sharply as to the departure of her mistress.

The girl could tell very little, except that Mrs. Mellish had said that she was going into the garden, and that she had left a letter in the study for the master of the house. Perhaps Mrs. Powell was even better aware of the existence of this letter than the Abigail herself. She had crept stealthily into John's room after her interview with the "Softy" and her chance encounter of Aurora. She had found the letter lying on the table, sealed with a crest and monogram that were engraved upon a blood-stone worn by Mrs. Mellish amongst the trinkets on her watch-chain. It was not

possible therefore to manipulate this letter with any safety, and Mrs. Powell had contented herself by guessing darkly at its contents. The "Softy" had told her of the fatal discovery of the morning, and she instinctively comprehended the meaning of that sealed letter. It was a letter of explanation and farewell, perhaps; perhaps only of farewell.

John strode along the corridor that led to his favourite room. The chamber was dimly lighted by the yellow evening sunlight which streamed from between the Venetian blinds, and drew golden bars upon the matted floor. But even in that dusky and uncertain light he saw the white patch upon the table, and sprang with tigerish haste upon the letter his wife had left for him.

He drew up the Venetian blind, and stood in the embrasure of the window, with the evening sunlight upon his face, reading Aurora's letter. There was neither anger nor alarm visible in his face as he read; only supreme love and supreme compassion.

"My poor darling! my poor girl! How could she think that there could ever be such a word as good-bye between us! Does she think so

lightly of my love as to believe that it could fail her now, when she wants it most? Why, if that man had lived," he thought, his face darkening with the memory of that unburied clay which yet lay in the still chamber at the north lodge,—"if that man had lived, and had claimed her, and carried her from me by the right of the paper in my breast, I would have clung to her still; I would have followed wherever he went, and would have lived near him, that she might have known where to look for a defender from every wrong: I would have been his servant, the willing servant and contented hanger-on of a boor, if I could have served her by enduring his insolence. So, my dear, my dear," murmured the young squire, with a tender smile, "it was worse than foolish to write this letter to me, and even more useless than it was cruel to run away from the man who would follow you to the farthest end of this wide world."

He put the letter into his pocket, and took his hat from the table. He was ready to start—he scarcely knew for what destination; for the end of the world, perhaps—in his search for the woman he loved. But he was going to Felden Woods before beginning the longer journey, as he fully

believed that Aurora would fly to her father in her foolish terror.

"To think that anything could ever happen to change or lessen my love for her," he said; "foolish girl! foolish girl!"

He rang for his servant, and ordered the hasty packing of his smallest portmanteau. He was going to town for a day or two, and he was going alone. He looked at his watch; it was only a quarter after eight, and the mail left Doncaster at half-past twelve. There was plenty of time, therefore; a great deal too much time for the feverish impatience of Mr. Mellish, who would have chartered a special engine to convey him, had the railway officials been willing. There were four long hours during which he must wait, wearing out his heart in his anxiety to follow the woman he loved, to take her to his breast and comfort and shelter her, to tell her that true love knows neither decrease nor change. He ordered the dog-cart to be got ready for him at eleven o'clock. There was a slow train that left Doncaster at ten; but as it reached London only ten minutes before the mail, it was scarcely desirable as a conveyance. Yet after the hour had passed

for its starting, Mr. Mellish reproached himself bitterly for that lost ten minutes, and was tormented by a fancy that, through the loss of those very ten minutes, he should miss the chance of an immediate meeting with Aurora.

It was nine o'clock before he remembered the necessity of making some pretence of sitting down to dinner. He took his place at the end of the long table, and sent for Mrs. Powell, who appeared in answer to his summons, and seated herself with a well-bred affectation of not knowing that the dinner had been put off for an hour and a half.

"I'm sorry I've kept you so long, Mrs. Powell," he said, as he sent the ensign's widow a ladleful of clear soup, that was of the temperature of lemonade. "The truth is, that I—I—find I shall be compelled to run up to town by the mail."

"Upon no unpleasant business, I hope?"

"Oh, dear no, not at all. Mrs. Mellish has gone up to her father's place, and—and—has requested me to follow her," added John, telling a lie with considerable awkwardness, but with no very great remorse. He did not speak again during dinner. He ate anything that his servants

put before him, and took a good deal of wine; but he ate and drank alike unconsciously, and when the cloth had been removed, and he was left alone with Mrs. Powell, he sat staring at the reflection of the wax-candles in the depths of the mahogany. It was only when the lady gave a little ceremonial cough, and rose with the intention of simpering out of the room, that he roused himself from his long reverie, and looked up suddenly.

"Don't go just this moment, if you please, Mrs. Powell," he said. "If you'll sit down again for a few minutes, I shall be glad. I wished to say a word or two to you before I leave Mellish Park."

He rose as he spoke, and pointed to a chair. Mrs. Powell seated herself, and looked at him earnestly; with an eager, viperish earnestness, and a nervous movement of her thin lips.

"When you came here, Mrs. Powell," said John, gravely, "you came as my wife's guest, and as my wife's friend. I need scarcely say that you could have had no better claim upon my friendship and hospitality. If you had brought a regiment of dragoons with you, as the condition of

your visit, they would have been welcome; for I believed that your coming would give pleasure to my poor girl. If my wife had been indebted to you for any word of kindness, for any look of affection, I would have repaid that debt a thousand-fold, had it lain in my power to do so by any service, however difficult. You would have lost nothing by your love for my poor motherless girl, if any devotion of mine could have recompensed you for that tenderness. It was only reasonable that I should look to you as the natural friend and counsellor of my darling; and I did so, honestly and confidently. Forgive me if I tell you that I very soon discovered how much I had been mistaken in entertaining such a hope. I soon saw that you were no friend to my wife."

"Mr. Mellish!"

"Oh, my dear madam, you think because I keep hunting-boots and guns in the room I call my study, and because I remember no more of the Latin that my tutor crammed into my head than the first line of the Eton Syntax,—you think, because I'm not clever, that I must needs be a fool. That's your mistake, Mrs. Powell; I'm

not clever enough to be a fool, and I've just sufficient perception to see any danger that assails those I love. You don't like my wife; you grudge her her youth and her beauty, and my foolish love for her; and you've watched, and listened, and plotted—in a lady-like way, of course—to do her some evil. Forgive me if I speak plainly. Where Aurora is concerned, I feel very strongly. To hurt her little finger is to torture my whole body. To stab her once is to stab me a hundred times. I have no wish to be discourteous to a lady; I am only sorry that you have been unable to love a poor girl who has rarely failed to win friends amongst those who have known her. Let us part without animosity, but let us understand each other for the first time. You do not like us, and it is better that we should part before you learn to hate us."

The ensign's widow waited in utter stupefaction until Mr. Mellish stopped, from want of breath, perhaps, rather than from want of words.

All her viperish nature rose in white defiance of him as he walked up and down the room, chafing himself into a fury with his recollection of the wrong she had done him in not loving his wife.

"You are perhaps aware, Mr. Mellish," she said, after an awful pause, "that under such circumstances the annual stipend due to me for my services cannot be expected to cease at your caprice; and that, although you may turn me out of doors,"—Mrs. Powell descended to this very commonplace locution, and stooped to the vernacular in her desire to be spiteful,—"you must understand that you will be liable for my salary until the expiration of——"

"Oh, pray do not imagine that I shall repudiate any claim you may make upon me, Mrs. Powell," said John, eagerly; "Heaven knows it has been no pleasure to me to speak as plainly as I have spoken to-night. I will write a cheque for any amount you may consider proper as compensation for this change in our arrangements. I might have been more polite, perhaps; I might have told you that my wife and I think of travelling on the Continent, and that we are, therefore, breaking up our household. I have preferred telling you the plain truth. Forgive me if I have wounded you."

Mrs. Powell rose, pale, menacing, terrible; terrible in the intensity of her feeble wrath, and

in the consciousness that she had power to stab the heart of the man who had affronted her.

"You have merely anticipated my own intention, Mr. Mellish," she said. "I could not possibly have remained a member of your household after the very unpleasant circumstances that have lately transpired. My worst wish is, that you may find yourself involved in no greater trouble through your connection with Mr. Floyd's daughter. Let me add one word of warning before I have the honour of wishing you good evening. Malicious people might be tempted to smile at your enthusiastic mention of your 'wife;' remembering that the person to whom you allude is Aurora Conyers, the widow of your groom, and that she has never possessed any legal claim to the title you bestow upon her."

If Mrs. Powell had been a man, she would have found her head in contact with the Turkey carpet of John's dining-room before she could have concluded this speech; as she was a woman, John Mellish stood looking her full in the face, waiting till she had finished speaking. But he bore the stab she inflicted without flinching under its cruel pain, and he robbed her of the

gratification she had hoped for. He did not let her see his anguish.

"If Lofthouse has told her the secret," he cried, when the door had closed upon Mrs. Powell, "I'll horsewhip him in the church."

CHAPTER V.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

Aurora found a civil railway official at the Doncaster station, who was ready to take a ticket for her, and find her a comfortable seat in an empty carriage; but before the train started, a couple of sturdy farmers took their seats upon the spring cushions opposite Mrs. Mellish. They were wealthy gentlemen, who farmed their own land, and travelled express; but they brought a powerful odour of the stable-yard into the carriage, and they talked with that honest northern twang which always has a friendly sound to the writer of this story. Aurora, with her veil drawn over her pale face, attracted very little of their attention. They talked of farming-stock and horse-racing, and looked out of the window every now and then to shrug their shoulders at somebody else's agriculture.

I believe they were acquainted with the capabilities of every acre of land between Doncaster and Harrow, and knew how it might have been made "worth ten shillin' an acre more than it was, too, sir," as they perpetually informed each other.

How wearisome their talk must have seemed to the poor lonely creature who was running away from the man she loved,—from the man who loved her, and would love to the end of time!

"I didn't mean what I wrote," she thought. "My poor boy would never love me less. His great heart is made up of unselfish love and generous devotion. But he would be so sorry for me; he would be so sorry! He could never be proud of me again; he could never boast of me any more. He would be always resenting some insult, or imagining some slight. It would be too painful for him. He would see his wife pointed at as the woman who had married her groom. He would be embroiled in a hundred quarrels, a hundred miseries. I will make the only return that I can ever make to him for his goodness to me: I will give him up, and go away and hide myself from him for ever."

She tried to imagine what John's life would be

without her. She tried to think of him in some future time, when he should have worn out his grief, and reconciled himself to her loss. But she could not, she could not! She could not endure any image of *him* in which he was separated from his love for her.

"How should I ever think of him without thinking of his love for me?" she thought. "He loved me from the first moment in which he saw me. I have never known him except as a lover; generous, pure, and true."

And in this mind Aurora watched the smaller stations, which looked like mere streaks of whitened woodwork as the express tore past them; though every one of them was a milestone upon the long road which was separating her from the man she loved.

Ah, careless wives, who think it a small thing, perhaps, that your husbands are honest and generous, constant and true, and who are apt to grumble because your next-door neighbours have started a carriage, while you are fain to be content with eighteenpenny airings in vehicles procured at the nearest cab-stand, — stop and think of this wretched girl, who in this hour of desolation

recalled a thousand little wrongs she had done to her husband, and would have laid herself under his feet to be walked over by him could she have thus atoned for her petty tyrannies, her pretty caprices! Think of her in her loneliness, with her heart yearning to go back to the man she loved, and with her love arrayed against herself and pleading for him. She changed her mind a hundred times during that four hours' journey; sometimes thinking that she would go back by the next train, and then again remembering that her first impulse had been, perhaps, after all, only too correct, and that John Mellish's heart had turned against her in the cruel humiliation of that morning's discovery.

Have you ever tried to imagine the anger of a person whom you have never seen angry? Have you ever called up the image of a face that has never looked on you except in love and gentleness, and invested that familiar countenance with the blank sternness of estrangement? Aurora did this. She acted over and over again in her weary brain the scene that might have taken place between her husband and herself. She remembered that scene in the hackneyed stage-

play, which everybody affects to ridicule and secretly weeps at. She remembered Mrs. Haller and the Stranger, the children, the Countess, the cottage, the jewels, the parchments, and all the old familiar properties of that well-known fifth act in the simple, social tragedy; and she pictured to herself John Mellish retiring into some distant country with his rheumatic trainer Langley, and becoming a misanthropical hermit, after the manner of the injured German.

What was her life to be henceforth? She shut her eyes upon that blank future.

"I will go back to my father," she thought; "I will go back to him again, as I went before. But this time there shall be no falsehoods, no equivocations; and this time nothing shall tempt me to leave him again."

Amid all her perplexities, she clung to the thought that Lucy and Talbot would help her. She would appeal to passionless Talbot Bulstrode in behalf of her poor heart-broken John.

"Talbot will tell me what is right and honourable to be done," she thought. "I will hold by what he says. He shall be the arbiter of my future."

I do not believe that Aurora had ever entertained any very passionate devotion for the handsome Cornishman; but it is very certain that she had always respected him. It may be that any love she had felt for him had grown out of that very respect, and that her reverence for his character was made all the greater by the contrast between him and the base-born schemer for whom her youth had been sacrificed. She had submitted to the decree which had separated her from her affianced lover, for she had believed in its justice; and she was ready now to submit to any decision pronounced by the man, in whose sense of honour she had unbounded confidence.

She thought of all these things again and again and again, while the farmers talked of sheep and turnips, of Thorley's food, swedes, and beans, and corn, and clover, and of mysterious diseases, which they discussed gravely, under such terms as "red gum," "finger and toe," &c. They alternated this talk with a dash of turf scandal; and even in the all-absorbing perplexities of her domestic sorrows, Mrs. Mellish could have turned fiercely upon these innocent farmers when they pooh-poohed John's stable, and made light of

the reputation of her namesake the bay filly, and declared that no horse that came out of the squire's stables was ever anything better than a plater or a screw.

The journey came to an end, only too quickly, it seemed to Aurora: too quickly, for every mile widened the gulf she had set between herself and the home she loved; every moment only brought the realization of her loss more fully home to her mind.

"I will abide by Talbot Bulstrode's advice," she kept saying to herself; indeed, this thought was the only reed to which she clung in her trouble. She was not a strong-minded woman. She had the generous, impulsive nature which naturally turns to others for help and comfort. Secretiveness had no part in her organization, and the one concealment of her life had been a perpetual pain and grief to her.

It was past eight o'clock when she found herself alone amidst the bustle and confusion of the King's Cross terminus. She sent a porter for a cab, and ordered the man to drive to Halfmoon Street. It was only a few days since she had met Lucy and Talbot at Felden Woods, and she

knew that Mr. Bulstrode and his wife were detained in town, waiting for the prorogation of the House.

It was Saturday evening, and therefore a holiday for the young advocate of the Cornish miners and their rights; but Talbot spent his leisure amongst Blue-books and Parliamentary Minutes, and poor Lucy, who might have been shining, a pale star, at some crowded *conversazione*, was compelled to forego the pleasure of struggling upon the staircase of one of those wise individuals who insist upon inviting their acquaintances to pack themselves into the smallest given space consistent with the preservation of life, and trample upon each other's lace flounces and varnished boots with smiling equanimity. Perhaps, in the universal fitness of things, even these fashionable evenings have a certain solemn purpose, deeply hidden under considerable surface-frivolity. It may be that they serve as moral gymnasia, in which the thews and sinews of social amenity are racked and tortured, with a view to their increased power of endurance. It is good for a man to have his favourite corn trodden upon, and yet be compelled to smile under the torture; and a

woman may learn her first great lesson in fortitude from the destruction of fifty guineas' worth of Mechlin, and the necessity of assuring the destroyer that she is rather gratified than otherwise by the sacrifice. *Noblesse oblige.* It is good to "suffer and be strong." Cold coffee and tepid ice-cream may not be the most strengthening or delightful of food; but there may be a moral diet provided at these social gatherings which is not without its usefulness.

Lucy willingly abandoned her own delights; for she had that ladylike appreciation of society which had been a part of her education. Her placid nature knew no abnormal tendencies. She liked the amusements that other girls of her position liked. She had none of the eccentric predilections which had been so fatal to her cousin. She was not like that lovely and illustrious Spanish lady who is said to love the cirque better than the opera, and to have a more intense appreciation of a series of flying plunges through tissue-paper-covered hoops than of the most elaborate *fioriture* of tenor or soprano. She gave up something, therefore, in resigning the stereotyped gaieties of the London season. But

Heaven knows, it was very pleasant to her to make the sacrifice. Her inclinations were fatted lambs, which she offered willingly upon the altar of her idol. She was never happier than when sitting by her husband's side, making extracts from the Blue-books to be quoted in some pamphlet that he was writing; or if she was ever happier, it was only when she sat in the ladies' gallery, straining her eyes athwart the floriated iron fretwork, which screened her from any wandering glances of distracted members, in her vain efforts to see her husband in his place on the Government benches, and very rarely seeing more than the crown of Mr. Bulstrode's hat.

She sat by Talbot's side upon this evening, busy with some pretty needlework, and listening with patient attention to her husband's perusal of the proof-sheets of his last pamphlet. It was a noble specimen of the stately and ponderous style of writing, and it abounded in crushing arguments and magnificent climaxes, which utterly annihilated somebody (Lucy didn't exactly make out who), and most incontrovertibly established something, though Mrs. Bulstrode couldn't quite understand what. It was enough for her that he had written

that wonderful composition, and that it was his rich baritone voice that rolled out the studied Johnsonese. If he had pleased to read Greek to her, she would have thought it pleasant to listen. Indeed there were pet passages of Homer which Mr. Bulstrode now and then loved to recite to his wife, and which the little hypocrite pretended to admire. No cloud had darkened the calm heaven of Lucy's married life. She loved, and was beloved. It was a part of her nature to love in a reverential attitude, and she had no wish to approach nearer to her idol. To sit at her sultan's feet and replenish his chibouque; to watch him while he slept, and wave the punkah above his seraphic head; to love and admire and pray for him,—made up the sum of her heart's desire.

It was close upon nine o'clock, when Mr. Bulstrode was interrupted in the very crowning sentence of his peroration by a double knock at the street-door. The houses in Halfmoon Street are small, and Talbot flung down his proof-sheet with a gesture expressive of considerable irritation. Lucy looked up, half sympathizingly, half apologetically, at her lord and master. She

held herself in a manner responsible for his ease and comfort.

"Who can it be, dear?" she murmured; "at such a time, too!"

"Some annoyance or other, I dare say, my dear," answered Talbot. "But whoever it is, I won't see them to-night. I suppose, Lucy, I've given you a pretty fair idea of the effect of this upon my honourable friend the member for——"

Before Mr. Bulstrode could name the borough of which his honourable friend was the representative, a servant announced that Mrs. Mellish was waiting below to see the master of the house.

"Aurora!" exclaimed Lucy, starting from her seat and dropping the fairy implements of her work in a little shower upon the carpet; "Aurora! It can't be, surely? Why, Talbot, she only went back to Yorkshire a few days ago."

"Mr. and Mrs. Mellish are both below, I suppose?" Mr. Bulstrode said to the servant.

"No, sir; Mrs. Mellish came alone in a cab from the station, I believe. Mrs. Mellish is in the library, sir. I asked her to walk upstairs; but she requested to see you alone, sir, if you please."

"I'll come directly," answered Talbot. "Tell Mrs. Mellish I will be with her immediately."

The door closed upon the servant, and Lucy ran towards it, eager to hurry to her cousin.

"Poor Aurora!" she said; "there must be something wrong, surely. Uncle Archibald has been taken ill, perhaps; he was not looking well when we left Felden. I'll go to her, Talbot; I'm sure she'd like to see me first."

"No, Lucy; no," answered Mr. Bulstrode, laying his hand upon the door, and standing between it and his wife; "I had rather you didn't see your cousin until I have seen her. It will be better for me to see her first." His face was very grave, and his manner almost stern as he said this. Lucy shrank from him as if he had wounded her. She understood him, very vaguely, it is true; but she understood that he had some doubt or suspicion of her cousin, and for the first time in his life Mr. Bulstrode saw an angry light kindled in his wife's blue eyes.

"Why should you prevent my seeing Aurora?" Lucy asked; "she is the best and dearest girl in the world. Why shouldn't I see her?"

Talbot Bulstrode stared in blank amazement at his mutinous wife.

"Be reasonable, my dear Lucy," he answered very mildly; "I hope always to be able to respect your cousin—as much as I respect you. But if Mrs. Mellish leaves her husband in Yorkshire, and comes to London without his permission,—for he would never permit her to come alone,—she must explain to me why she does so before I can suffer my wife to receive her."

Poor Lucy's fair head drooped under this reproof.

She remembered her last conversation with her cousin; that conversation in which Aurora had spoken of some far-off day of trouble, that might bring her to ask for comfort and shelter in Half-moon Street. Had the day of trouble come already?

"Is it wrong of Aurora to come alone, Talbot, dear?" Lucy asked meekly.

"Is it wrong?" repeated Mr. Bulstrode, fiercely. "Would it be wrong for you to go tearing from here to Cornwall, child?"

He was irritated by the mere imagination of

such an outrage, and he looked at Lucy as if he half suspected her of some such intention.

"But Aurora may have had some very particular reason, dear?" pleaded his wife.

"I cannot imagine any reason powerful enough to justify such a proceeding," answered Talbot; "but I shall be better able to judge of that when I've heard what Mrs. Mellish has to say. Stay here, Lucy, till I send for you."

"Yes, Talbot."

She obeyed as submissively as a child; but she lingered near the door after her husband had closed it upon her, with a mournful yearning in her heart. She wanted to go to her cousin, and comfort her, if she had need of comfort. She dreaded the effect of her husband's cold and passionless manner upon Aurora's impressionable nature.

Mr. Bulstrode went down to the library to receive his kinswoman. It would have been strange if he had failed to remember that Christmas evening, nearly two years before, upon which he had gone down to the shadowy room at Felden, with every hope of his heart crushed, to ask for comfort from the woman he loved. It would

have been strange if, in the brief interval that elapsed between his leaving the drawing-room and entering the library, his mind had not flown back to that day of desolation. If there was an infidelity to Lucy in that sharp thrill of pain that pierced his heart as the old memory came back, the sin was as short-lived as the agony which it brought with it. He was able now to say, in all singleness of heart, "I made a wise choice, and I shall never repent having made it."

The library was a small apartment at the back of the dining-room. It was dimly lighted, for Aurora had lowered the lamp. She did not want Mr. Bulstrode to see her face.

"My dear Mrs. Mellish," said Talbot gravely, "I am so surprised at this visit, that I scarcely know how to say I am glad to see you. I fear something must have happened to cause your travelling alone. John is ill, perhaps, or——"

He might have said much more if Aurora had not interrupted him by casting herself upon her knees before him, and looking up at him with a pale, agonized face, that seemed almost ghastly in the dim lamp-light.

It was impossible to describe the look of horror

that came over Talbot Bulstrode's face as she did this. It was the Felden scene over again. He came to her in the hope that she would justify herself, and she tacitly acknowledged her humiliation.

She was a guilty woman, then; a guilty creature, whom it would be his painful duty to cast out of that pure household. She was a poor, lost, polluted wretch, who must not be admitted into the holy atmosphere of a Christian gentleman's home.

"Mrs. Mellish! Mrs. Mellish!" he cried, "what is the meaning of this? Why do you give me this horrible pain again? Why do you insist upon humiliating yourself and me by such a scene as this?"

"Oh, Talbot, Talbot!" answered Aurora, "I come to you because you are good and honourable. I am a desolate, wretched woman, and I want your help—I want your advice. I will abide by it; I will, Talbot Bulstrode; so help me, Heaven."

Her voice was broken by her sobs. In her passionate grief and confusion she forgot that it was just possible such an appeal as this might be rather bewildering in its effect upon Talbot. But

perhaps, even amid his bewilderment, the young Cornishman saw, or fancied he saw, something in Aurora's manner which had no fellowship with guilt; or with such guilt as he had at first dreaded. I imagine that it must have been so; for his voice was softer and his manner kinder when he next addressed her.

"Aurora," he said, "for pity's sake, be calm. Why have you left Mellish Park? What is the business in which I can help or advise you? Be calm, my dear girl, and I will try and understand you. God knows how much I wish to be a friend to you, for I stand in a brother's place, you know, my dear, and demand a brother's right to question your actions. I am sorry you came up to town alone, because such a step was calculated to compromise you; but if you will be calm and tell me why you came, I may be able to understand your motives. Come, Aurora, try and be calm."

She was still on her knees, sobbing hysterically. Talbot would have summoned his wife to her assistance, but he could not bear to see the two women associated until he had discovered the cause of Aurora's agitation.

He poured some water into a glass, and gave it

her. He placed her in an easy-chair near the open window, and then walked up and down the room until she had recovered herself.

"Talbot Bulstrode," she said quietly, after a long pause, "I want you to help me in the crisis of my life. I must be candid with you, therefore, and tell you that which I would have died rather than tell you two years ago. You remember the night upon which you left Felden?"

"Remember it? Yes, yes."

"The secret which separated us then, Talbot, was the one secret of my life,—the secret of my disobedience, the secret of my father's sorrow. You asked me to give you an account of that one year which was missing out of the history of my life. I could not do so, Talbot; *I would not!* My pride revolted against the horrible humiliation. If you had discovered the secret yourself, and had accused me of the disgraceful truth, I would have attempted no denial; but with my own lips to utter the hateful story—no, no, I could have borne anything better than that. But now that my secret is common property, in the keeping of police-officers and stable-boys, I can afford to tell you all. When I left the school in

the Rue Saint-Dominique, I ran away to marry my father's groom!"

"Aurora!"

Talbot Bulstrode dropped into the chair nearest him, and sat blankly staring at his wife's cousin. Was this the secret humiliation which had prostrated her at his feet in the chamber at Felden Woods?

"Oh, Talbot, how could I have told you this? How can I tell you now why I did this mad and wicked thing, blighting the happiness of my youth by my own act, and bringing shame and grief upon my father? I had no romantic, overwhelming love for this man. I cannot plead the excuses which some women urge for their madness. I had only a school-girl's sentimental fancy for his dashing manner, only a school-girl's frivolous admiration of his handsome face. I married him because he had dark-blue eyes, and long eyelashes, and white teeth, and brown hair. He had insinuated himself into a kind of intimacy with me, by bringing me all the empty gossip of the race-course, by extra attention to my favourite horses, by pampering my pets. All these things brought about association between us; he was always

my companion in my rides: and he contrived, before long, to tell me his story. Bah! why should I weary you with it?" cried Aurora scornfully. "He was a prince in disguise, of course; he was a gentleman's son; his father had kept his hunters; he was at war with fortune; he had been ill-used and trampled down in the battle of life. His talk was something to this effect, and I believed him. Why should I disbelieve him? I had lived all my life in an atmosphere of truth. My governess and I talked perpetually of the groom's romantic story. She was a silly woman, and encouraged my folly; out of mere stupidity, I believe, and with no suspicion of the mischief she was doing. We criticised the groom's handsome face, his white hands, his aristocratic manners. I mistook insolence for good breeding; Heaven help me! And as we saw scarcely any society at that time, I compared my father's groom with the few guests who came to Felden; and the town-bred impostor profited by comparison with rustic gentlemen. Why should I stay to account to you for my folly, Talbot Bulstrode? I could never succeed in doing so, though I talked for a week; I cannot account

to myself for my madness. I can only look back to that horrible time, and wonder why I was mad."

"My poor Aurora! my poor Aurora!"

He spoke in the pitying tone with which he might have comforted her had she been a child. He was thinking of her in her childish ignorance, exposed to the insidious advances of an unscrupulous schemer, and his heart bled for the motherless girl.

"My father found some letters written by this man, and discovered that his daughter had affianced herself to his groom. He made this discovery while I was out riding with James Conyers,—the groom's name was Conyers,—and when I came home there was a fearful scene between us. I was mad enough and wicked enough to defend my conduct, and to reproach my father with the illiberality of his sentiments. I went even further: I reminded him that the house of Floyd and Floyd had had a very humble origin. He took me to Paris upon the following day. I thought myself cruelly treated. I revolted against the ceremonial monotony of the *pension;* I hated the studies, which were ten times more difficult

than anything I had ever experienced with my governess; I suffered terribly from the conventual seclusion, for I had been used to perfect freedom amongst the country roads round Felden: and amidst all this, the groom pursued me with letters and messages; for he had followed me to Paris, and spent his money recklessly in bribing the servants and hangers-on of the school. He was playing for a high stake, and he played so desperately that he won. I ran away from school, and married him at Dover, within eight or nine hours of my escape from the Rue Saint-Dominique."

She buried her face in her hands, and was silent for some time.

"Heaven have pity upon my wretched ignorance!" she said at last; "the illusion under which I had married this man ended in about a week. At the end of that time I discovered that I was the victim of a mercenary wretch, who meant to use me to the uttermost as a means of wringing money from my father. For some time I submitted, and my father paid, and paid dearly, for his daughter's folly; but he refused to receive the man I had married, or to see me until I

separated myself from that man. He offered the groom an income, on the condition of his going to Australia, and resigning all association with me for ever. But the man had a higher game to play. He wanted to bring about a reconciliation with my father; and he thought that in due time that tender father's resolution would have yielded to the force of his love. It was little better than a year after our marriage that I made a discovery that transformed me in one moment from a girl into a woman; a revengeful woman, perhaps, Mr. Bulstrode. I discovered that I had been wronged, deceived, and outraged by a wretch who laughed at my ignorant confidence in him. I had learned to hate the man long before this occurred: I had learned to despise his shallow trickeries, his insolent pretensions; but I do not think I felt his deeper infamy the less keenly for that. We were travelling in the south of France, my husband playing the great gentleman upon my father's money, when this discovery was made by me—or not by me; for it was forced upon me by a woman who knew my story and pitied me. Within half an hour of obtaining this knowledge, I acted upon it. I wrote to James Conyers,

telling him I had discovered that which gave me the right to call upon the law to release me from him: and if I refrained from doing so, it was for my father's sake, and not for his. I told him that so long as he left me unmolested and kept my secret, I would remit him money from time to time. I told him that I left him to the associations he had chosen for himself; and that my only prayer was, that God, in His mercy, might grant me complete forgetfulness of him. I left this letter for him with the *concierge*, and quitted the hotel in such a manner as to prevent his obtaining any trace of the way I had gone. I stopped in Paris for a few days, waiting for a reply to a letter I had written to my father, telling him that James Conyers was dead. Perhaps that was the worst sin of my life, Talbot. I deceived my father; but I believed that I was doing a wise and merciful thing in setting his mind at rest. He would have never been happy so long as he had believed the man lived. You understand all now, Talbot," she said mournfully. "You remember the morning at Brighton?"

"Yes, yes; and the newspaper with the marked paragraph—the report of the jockey's death."

"That report was false, Talbot Bulstrode," cried Aurora. "James Conyers was not killed."

Talbot's face grew suddenly pale. He began to understand something of the nature of that trouble which had brought Aurora to him.

"What, he was still living, then?" he said anxiously.

"Yes; until the night before last."

"But where—where has he been all this time?"

"During the last ten days—at Mellish Park."

She told him the terrible story of the murder. The trainer's death had not yet been reported in the London papers. She told him the dreadful story; and then, looking up at him with an earnest, imploring face, as she might have done had he been indeed her brother, she entreated him to help and counsel her in this terrible hour of need.

"Teach me how to do what is best for my dear love," she said. "Don't think of me or my happiness, Talbot; think only of him. I will make any sacrifice; I will submit to anything. I want to atone to my poor dear for all the misery I have brought upon him."

Talbot Bulstrode did not make any reply to this earnest appeal. The administrative powers of his mind were at work: he was busy summing up facts and setting them before him, in order to grapple with them fairly; and he had no attention to waste upon sentiment or emotion. He was walking up and down the room, with his eyebrows knitted sternly over his cold gray eyes, and his head bent.

"How many people know this secret, Aurora?" he asked presently.

"I can't tell you that; but I fear it must be very generally known," answered Mrs. Mellish, with a shuddering recollection of the "Softy's" insolence. "I heard of the discovery that had been made from a hanger-on of the stables, a man who hates me,—a man whom I—had a misunderstanding with."

"Have you any idea who it was that shot this Conyers?"

"No, not the least idea."

"You do not even guess at any one?"

"No."

Talbot took a few more turns up and down the small apartment, in evident trouble and per-

plexity of mind. He left the room presently, and called at the foot of the staircase:

"Lucy, my dear, come down to your cousin."

I'm afraid Mrs. Bulstrode must have been lurking somewhere about the outside of the drawing-room door, for she flew down the stairs at the sound of the strong voice, and was by her husband's side two or three seconds after he had spoken.

"O Talbot!" she said, "how long you have been! I thought you would never send for me. What has been the matter with my poor darling?"

"Go in to her, and comfort her, my dear," Mr. Bulstrode answered, gravely: "she has had enough trouble, Heaven knows, poor girl. Don't ask her any questions, Lucy; but make her as comfortable as you can, and give her the best room you can find for her. She will stay with us as long as she remains in town."

"Dear, dear Talbot," murmured the young Cornishman's grateful worshipper, "how kind you are!"

"Kind!" cried Mr. Bulstrode; "she has need of friends, Lucy; and, God knows, I will act a

brother's part towards her, faithfully and bravely. Yes, bravely!" he added, raising his head with an almost defiant gesture as he slowly ascended the stairs.

What was the dark cloud which he saw brooding so fatally over the far horizon? He dared not think of what it was,—he dared not even acknowledge its presence; but there was a sense of trouble and horror in his breast that told him the shadow was there.

Lucy Bulstrode ran into the library, and flung herself upon her cousin's breast, and wept with her. She did not ask the nature of the sorrow which had brought Aurora an unexpected and uninvited guest to that modest little dwelling-house. She only knew that her cousin was in trouble, and that it was her happy privilege to offer her shelter and consolation. She would have fought a sturdy battle in defence of this privilege; but she adored her husband for the generosity which had granted it to her without a struggle. For the first time in her life, poor gentle Lucy took a new position with her cousin. It was her turn to protect Aurora; it was her turn to display a pretty motherly tenderness for the

desolate creature whose aching head rested on her bosom.

The West-End clocks were striking three, in the dead middle of the night, when Mrs. Mellish fell into a feverish slumber, even in her sleep, even in her sleep repeating again and again: "My poor John! my poor dear love! what will become of him? my own faithful darling!"

CHAPTER VI.

TALBOT BULSTRODE'S ADVICE.

Talbot Bulstrode went out early upon the quiet Sunday morning after Aurora's arrival, and walked down to the Telegraph Company's Office at Charing Cross, whence he despatched a message to Mr. John Mellish. It was a very brief message, only telling Mr. Mellish to come to town without delay, and that he would find Aurora in Halfmoon Street. Mr. Bulstrode walked quietly homewards in the morning sunshine, after having performed this duty. Even the London streets were bright and dewy in that early sunlight, for it was only a little after seven o'clock, and the fresh morning breezes came sweeping over the house-tops, bringing health and purity from Shooter's Hill and Highgate, Streatham and Barnsbury, Richmond and Hampstead. The white morning mists were slowly melting

from the worn grass in the Green Park; and weary creatures, who had had no better shelter than the quiet sky, were creeping away to find such wretched resting-places as they might, in that free city, in which, to sit for an unreasonable time upon a doorstep, or to ask a rich citizen for the price of a loaf, is to commit an indictable offence.

Surely it was impossible for any young legislator not quite worn out by a life-long struggle with the time which was never meant to be set right,—surely it was impossible for any fresh-hearted prosperous young Liberal to walk through those quiet streets without thinking of these things. Talbot Bulstrode thought very earnestly and very mournfully. To what end were his labours, after all? He was fighting for a handful of Cornish miners; doing battle with the rampant spirit of circumlocution for the sake of a few benighted wretches, buried in the darkness of a black abyss of ignorance a hundred times deeper and darker than the material obscurities in which they laboured. He was working his hardest and his best that these men might be taught, in some easy, unambitious manner, the simplest elements of

Christian love and Christian duty. He was working for these poor far-away creatures, in their forgotten corner of the earth; and here, around and about him, was ignorance more terrible, because, hand-in-hand with ignorance of all good, there was the fatal experience of all evil. The simple Cornish miner who uses his pickaxe in the region of his friend's skull, when he wishes to enforce an argument, does so because he knows no other species of emphasis. But in the London universities of crime, knavery and vice and violence and sin matriculate and graduate day by day; to take their degrees in the felon's dock or on the scaffold. How could he be otherwise than sorrowful, thinking of these things? Were the Cities of the Plain worse than this city; in which there were yet so many good and earnest men labouring patiently day by day, and taking little rest? Was the great accumulation of evil so heavy that it rolled for ever back upon the untiring Sisyphus? Or did they make some imperceptible advance towards the mountain-top, despite of all discouragement?

With this weary question debating itself in his brain, Mr. Bulstrode walked along Piccadilly towards the comfortable bachelor's quarters, whose

most commonplace attributes Lucy had turned to favour and to prettiness; but at the door of the Gloucester Coffee-house Talbot paused to stare absently at a nervous-looking chestnut mare, who insisted upon going through several lively performances upon her hind-legs, very much to the annoyance of an unshaven ostler, and not particularly to the advantage of a smart little dog-cart to which she was harnessed.

"You needn't pull her mouth to pieces, my man," cried a voice from the doorway of the hotel; "use her gently, and she'll soon quiet herself. Steady, my girl; steady!" added the owner of this voice, walking to the dog-cart as he spoke.

Talbot had good reason to stop short, for this gentleman was Mr. John Mellish, whose pale face, and loose, disordered hair betokened a sleepless night.

He was going to spring into the dog-cart, when his old friend tapped him on the shoulder.

"This is rather a lucky accident, John; for you're the very person I want to see," said Mr. Bulstrode. "I've just telegraphed to you."

John Mellish stared with a blank face.

"Don't hinder me, please," he said; "I'll talk to

you by-and-by. I'll call upon you in a day or two. I'm just off to Felden. I've only been in town an hour and a half, and should have gone down before, if I had not been afraid of knocking up the family."

He made another attempt to get into the vehicle, but Talbot caught him by the arm.

"You needn't go to Felden," he said; "your wife's much nearer."

"Eh?"

"She's at my house. Come and have some breakfast."

There was no shadow upon Talbot Bulstrode's mind as his old schoolfellow caught him by the hand, and nearly dislocated his wrist in a paroxysm of joy and gratitude. It was impossible for him to look beyond that sudden burst of sunshine upon John's face. If Mr. Mellish had been separated from his wife for ten years, and had just returned from the Antipodes for the sole purpose of seeing her again, he could scarcely have appeared more delighted at the prospect of a speedy meeting.

"Aurora here!" he said; "at your house? My dear old fellow, you can't mean it! But of course I ought to have known she'd come to you. She

couldn't have done anything better or wiser, after having been so foolish as to doubt me."

"She came to me for advice, John. She wanted me to advise her how to act for your happiness,—yours, you great Yorkshireman, and not her own."

"Bless her noble heart!" cried Mr. Mellish, huskily. "And you told her——"

"I told her nothing, my dear fellow; but I tell you to take your lawyer down to Doctor's Commons with you to-morrow morning, get a new licence and marry your wife for the second time, in some quiet, little, out-of-the-way church in the City."

Aurora had risen very early upon that peaceful Sunday morning. The few hours of feverish and fitful sleep had brought very little comfort to her. She stood with her weary head leaning against the window-frame, and looked hopelessly out into the empty London street. She looked out into the desolate beginning of a new life, the blank uncertainty of an unknown future. All the minor miseries peculiar to a toilet in a strange room were doubly miserable to her. Lucy had brought the poor luggageless traveller all the paraphernalia of the toilet-table, and had arranged

everything with her own busy hands. But the most insignificant trifle that Aurora touched in her cousin's chamber brought back the memory of some costly toy chosen for her by her husband. She had travelled in her white morning-dress, and the soft lace and muslin were none the fresher for her journey; but as two of Lucy's dresses joined together scarcely fitted her stately cousin, Mrs. Mellish was fain to be content with her limp muslin. What did it matter? The loving eyes which noted every shred of ribbon, every morsel of lace, every fold of her garments, were, perhaps, never to look upon her again. She twisted her hair into a careless mass at the back of her head, and had completed her toilet, when Lucy came to the door, tenderly anxious to know how she had slept.

"I will abide by Talbot's decision," she repeated to herself again and again. "If he says it is best for my dear that we should part, I will go away for ever. I will ask my father to take me far away, and my poor darling shall not even know where I have gone. I will be true in what I do, and will do it thoroughly."

She looked to Talbot Bulstrode as a wise judge,

to whose sentence she would be willing to submit. Perhaps she did this because her own heart kept for ever repeating, "Go back to the man who loves you. Go back, go back! There is no wrong you can do him so bitter as to desert him. There is no unhappiness you can bring upon him equal to the unhappiness of losing you. Let *me* be your guide. Go back, go back!"

But this selfish monitor must not be listened to. How bitterly this poor girl, so old in experience of sorrow, remembered the selfish sin of her mad marriage! She had refused to sacrifice a schoolgirl's foolish delusion; she had disobeyed the father who had given her seventeen years of patient love and devotion; and she looked at all the misery of her youth as the fatal growth of this evil seed, so rebelliously sown. Surely such a lesson was not to be altogether unheeded! Surely it was powerful enough to teach her the duty of sacrifice! It was this thought that steeled her against the pleadings of her own affection. It was for this that she looked to Talbot Bulstrode as the arbiter of her future. Had she been a Roman Catholic, she would have gone to her confessor, and appealed to a priest—who, having no social

ties of his own, must, of course, be the best judge of all the duties involved in domestic relations—for comfort and succour; but being of another faith, she went to the man whom she most respected, and who, being a husband himself, might, as she thought, be able to comprehend the duty that was due to her husband.

She went down-stairs with Lucy into a little inner room upon the drawing-room floor; a snug apartment, opening into a mite of a conservatory. It was Mr. and Mrs. Bulstrode's habit to breakfast in this cosy little chamber, rather than in that awful temple of slippery morocco, funereal bronze, and ghastly mahogany, which upholsterers insist upon as the only legitimate place in which an Englishman may take his meals. Lucy loved to sit opposite her husband at the small round table, and minister to his morning appetite from her pretty breakfast equipage of silver and china. She knew—to the smallest weight employed at Apothecaries' Hall, I think—how much sugar Mr. Bulstrode liked in his tea. She poured the cream into his cup as carefully as if she had been making up a prescription. He took the simple beverage in a great shallow breakfast-cup of fragile

turquoise Sèvres, that had cost seven guineas; and had been made for Madame du Barry, the *rococo* merchant had told Talbot. (Had his customer been a lady, I fear Marie Antoinette would have been described as the original possessor of this porcelain.) Mrs. Bulstrode loved to minister to her husband. She picked the bloated livers of martyred geese out of the Strasburg pies for his delectation; she spread the butter upon his dry toast; and pampered and waited on him, serving him as only such women serve their idols. But this morning she had her cousin's sorrows to comfort; and she established Aurora in a capacious chintz-covered easy-chair on the threshold of the conservatory, and seated herself at her feet.

"My poor pale darling!" she said, tenderly, "what can I do to bring the roses back to your cheeks?"

"Love me and pity me, dear," Aurora answered, gravely; "but don't ask me any questions."

The two women sat thus for some time, Aurora's handsome head bent over Lucy's fair face, and her hands clasped in both Lucy's hands. They talked very little, and only spoke then of indifferent matters, or of Lucy's happiness and Talbot's par-

liamentary career. The little clock over the chimney-piece struck the quarter before eight—they were very early, these unfashionable people—and a minute afterwards Mrs. Bulstrode heard her husband's step upon the stairs, returning from his ante-breakfast walk. It was his habit to take a constitutional stroll in the Green Park, now and then, so Lucy had thought nothing of this early excursion.

"Talbot has let himself in with his latch-key," said Mrs. Bulstrode; "and I may pour out the tea, Aurora. But listen, dear; I think there's some one with him."

There was no need to bid Aurora listen; she had started from her low seat, and stood erect and motionless, breathing in a quick, agitated manner, and looking towards the door. Besides Talbot Bulstrode's step there was another, quicker and heavier; a step she knew so well.

The door was opened, and Talbot entered the room, followed by a visitor, who pushed aside his host with very little attention to the laws of civilized society, and, indeed, nearly drove Mr. Bulstrode backwards into a gilded basket of flowers. But this stalwart John Mellish had no intention of

being unmannerly or brutal. He pushed aside his friend only as he would have pushed, or tried to push, aside a regiment of soldiers with fixed bayonets, or a Lancaster gun, or a raging ocean, or any other impediment that had come between him and Aurora. He had her in his arms before she could even cry his name aloud, in her glad surprise; and in another moment she was sobbing on his breast.

"My darling! my pet! my own!" he cried, smoothing her dark hair with his broad hand, and blessing her and weeping over her,—"my own love! How could you do this? how could you wrong me so much? My own precious darling! had you learnt to know me no better than *this*, in all our happy married life?"

"I came to ask Talbot's advice, John," she said, earnestly; "and I mean to abide by it, however cruel it may seem."

Mr. Bulstrode smiled gravely, as he watched these two foolish people. He was very much pleased with his part in the little domestic drama; and he contemplated them with a sublime consciousness of being the author of all this happiness. For they were happy. The poet has said, there

are some moments—very rare, very precious, very brief—which stand by themselves, and have their perfect fulness of joy within their own fleeting span, taking nothing from the past, demanding nothing of the future. Had John and Aurora known that they were to be separated by the breadth of Europe for the remainder of their several lives, they would not the less have wept joyful tears at the pure blissfulness of this meeting.

"You asked me for my advice, Aurora," said Talbot, "and I bring it you. Let the past die with the man who died the other night. The future is not yours to dispose of; it belongs to your husband, John Mellish."

Having delivered himself of these oracular sentences, Mr. Bulstrode seated himself at the breakfast-table, and looked into the mysterious and cavernous interior of a raised pie, with such an intent gaze, that it seemed as if he never meant to look out of it. He devoted so many minutes to this serious contemplation, that by the time he looked up again, Aurora had become quite calm, while Mr. Mellish affected an unnatural gaiety, and exhibited no stronger sign of past emotion than a

certain inflamed appearance in the region of his eyelids.

But this stalwart, devoted, impressionable Yorkshireman ate a most extraordinary repast in honour of this reunion. He spread mustard on his muffins. He poured Worcester sauce into his coffee, and cream over his devilled cutlets. He showed his gratitude to Lucy by loading her plate with comestibles she didn't want. He talked perpetually, and devoured incongruous viands in utter absence of mind. He shook hands with Talbot so many times across the breakfast-table, that he exposed the lives or limbs of the whole party to imminent peril from the boiling water in the urn. He threw himself into a paroxysm of coughing, and made himself scarlet in the face, by an injudicious use of cayenne pepper; and he exhibited himself altogether in such an imbecile light that Talbot Bulstrode was compelled to have recourse to all sorts of expedients to keep the servants out of the room during the progress of that rather noisy and bewildering repast.

The Sunday papers were brought to the master of the house before breakfast was over; and while John talked, ate, and gesticulated, Mr. Bulstrode

hid himself behind the open leaves of the latest edition of the 'Weekly Dispatch,' reading a paragraph that appeared in that journal.

This paragraph gave a brief account of the murder and the inquest at Mellish; and wound up by that rather stereotyped sentence, in which the public are informed that "the local police are giving unremitting attention to the affair, and we think we may venture to affirm that they have obtained a clue which will most probably lead to the early discovery of the guilty party."

Talbot Bulstrode, with the newspaper still before his face, sat for some little time frowning darkly at the page upon which this paragraph appeared. The horrible shadow, whose nature he would not acknowledge even to himself, once more lowered upon the horizon which had just seemed so bright and clear.

"I would give a thousand pounds," he thought, "if I could find the murderer of this man."

CHAPTER VII.

ON THE WATCH.

VERY soon after breakfast, upon that happy Sabbath of reunion and contentment, John Mellish drove Aurora to Felden Woods. It was necessary that Archibald Floyd should hear the story of the trainer's death, from the lips of his own children, before newspaper paragraphs terrified him with some imperfect outline of the truth.

The dashing phaeton in which Mr. Bulstrode was in the habit of driving his wife was brought to the door as the church-bells were calling devout citizens to their morning duties; and at that unseemly hour John Mellish smacked his whip, and dashed off in the direction of Westminster Bridge.

Talbot Bulstrode's horses soon left London behind them, and before long the phaeton was driving upon trim park-like roads, over-shadowed by luxuriant foliage, and bordered here and there by

exquisitely-ordered gardens and rustic villas, that glittered whitely in the sunshine. The holy peace of the quiet Sabbath was upon every object that they passed, even upon the leaves and flowers, as it seemed to Aurora. The birds sang subdued and murmuring harmonies; the light summer breeze scarcely stirred the deep grass, on which the lazy cattle stood to watch the phaeton dash by.

Ah, how happy Aurora was, seated by the side of the man whose love had outlasted every trial! How happy now that the dark wall that had divided them was shattered, and they were indeed united! John Mellish was as tender and pitying towards her, as a mother to her forgiving child. He asked no explanations; he sought to know nothing of the past. He was content to believe that she had been foolish and mistaken; and that the mistake and folly of her life would be buried in the grave of the murdered trainer.

The lodge-keeper at Felden Woods exclaimed as he opened the gates to his master's daughter. He was an old man, and he had opened the same gates more than twenty years before, when the banker's dark-eyed bride had first entered her husband's mansion.

Archibald Floyd welcomed his children heartily. How could he ever be otherwise than unutterably happy in the presence of his darling, however often she might come, with whatever eccentricity she might time her visits?

Mrs. Mellish led her father into his study.

"I must speak to you alone, papa," she said; "but John knows all I have to say. There are no secrets between us now. There never will be again."

Aurora had a painful story to tell her father, for she had to confess to him that she had deceived him upon the occasion of her return to Felden Woods after her parting with James Conyers.

"I told you a story, father," she said, "when I told you that my husband was dead. But Heaven knows, I believed that I should be forgiven the sin of that falsehood, for I thought that it would spare you grief and trouble of mind; and surely anything would have been justifiable that could have done that. I suppose good never can come out of evil, for I have been bitterly punished for my sin. I received a newspaper within a few months of my return, in which there was a paragraph describing the death of James

Conyers. The paragraph was not correct, for the man had escaped with his life; and when I married John Mellish, my first husband was alive."

Archibald Floyd uttered a cry of despair, and half rose from his easy-chair; but Aurora knelt upon the ground by his side, with her arms about him, soothing and comforting him.

"It is all over now, dear father," she said; "it is all over. The man is dead. I will tell you how he died by-and-by. It is all over. John knows all; and I am to marry him again. Talbot Bulstrode says that it is necessary, as our marriage was not legal. My own dear father, there is to be no more secrecy, no more unhappiness.—only love, and peace, and union for all of us."

She told the old man the story of the trainer's death, dwelling very little upon the particulars, and telling nothing of her own doings that night, except that she had been in the wood at the time of the murder, and that she had heard the pistol fired.

It was not a pleasant story, this story of murder and violence and treachery within the boundary of his daughter's home. Even amid Aurora's

assurances that all sorrow was past, that doubt and uncertainty were to vanish away before security and peace, Archibald Floyd could not control this feeling. He was restless and uneasy in spite of himself. He took John Mellish out upon the terrace in the afternoon sunshine, while Aurora lay asleep upon one of the sofas in the long drawing-room, and talked to him of the trainer's death as they walked up and down. There was nothing to be elicited from the young squire that threw any light upon the catastrophe, and Archibald Floyd tried in vain to find any issue out of the darkness of the mystery.

"Can you imagine any one having any motive for getting rid of this man?" the banker asked.

John shrugged his shoulders. He had been asked this question so often before, and had been always obliged to give the same reply.

"No; he knew of no motive which any one about Mellish could be likely to have.

"Had the man any money about him?" asked Mr. Floyd.

"Goodness knows whether he had or not," John answered carelessly; "but I should think it wasn't likely he had much. He had been out of

a situation, I believe, for some time before he came to me, and he had spent a good many months in a Prussian hospital. I don't suppose he was worth robbing."

The banker remembered the two thousand pounds which he had given to his daughter. What had Aurora done with that money? Had she known of the trainer's existence when she asked for it? and had she wanted it for him? She had not explained this in her hurried story of the murder, and how could he press her upon so painful a subject? Why should he not accept her own assurance that all was over, and that nothing remained but peace?

Archibald Floyd and his children spent a tranquil day together; not talking much, for Aurora was completely worn out by the fatigue and excitement she had undergone. What had her life been but agitation and terror since the day upon which Mr. John Pastern's letter had come to Mellish to tell her of the existence of her first husband? She slept through the best part of the day, lying upon a sofa, and with John Mellish sitting by her side keeping watch over her. She slept while the bells of Beckenham church sum-

moned the parishioners to afternoon service, and while her father went to assist in those quiet devotions, and to kneel on his hassock in the old square pew, and pray for the peace of his beloved child. Heaven knows how earnestly the old man prayed for his daughter's happiness, and how she filled his thoughts; not distracting him from more sacred thoughts, but blending her image with his worship in alternate prayer and thanksgiving! Those who watched him as he sat, with the sunshine on his gray head, listening reverentially to the sermon, little knew how much trouble had been mingled with the great prosperity of his life. They pointed him out respectfully to strangers, as a man whose signature across a slip of paper could make that oblong morsel of beaten rag into an incalculable sum of money; a man who stood upon a golden pinnacle with the Rothschilds and Montefiores and Couttses; who could afford to pay the National Debt any morning that the whim seized him; and who was yet a plain man, and simple as a child, as anybody might see, the admiring parishioners would add, as the banker came out of church shaking hands right and left, and nodding to the charity children.

I'm afraid the children dropped lower curtsies in the pathway of Mr. Floyd than even before the Vicar of Beckenham; for they had learned to associate the image of the banker with buns and tea, with sixpences and oranges, gambols on the smooth lawn at Felden Woods, and jovial feasts in monster tents to the music of clashing brazen bands, and with even greater treats in the way of excursions to a Crystal Palace on a hill, an enchanted fairyland of wonders, from which it was delicious to return in the dewy evening, singing hymns of rejoicing that shook the vans in which they travelled.

The banker had distributed happiness right and left; but the money which might have paid the National Debt had been impotent to save the life of the dark-eyed woman he had loved so tenderly, or to spare him one pang of uneasiness about his idolized child. Had not that all-powerful wealth been rather the primary cause of his daughter's trouble, since it had cast her, young, inexperienced, and trusting, a prey into the mercenary hands of a bad man, who would not have cared to persecute her but for the money that had made her such a golden prize for any adventurer

who might please to essay the hazard of winning her?

With the memory of these things always in his mind, it was scarcely strange that Archibald Floyd should bear the burden of his riches meekly and fearfully, knowing that, whatever he might be in the Stock Exchange, he was in the sight of Heaven only a feeble old man, very assailable by suffering, very liable to sorrow, and humbly dependent on the mercy of the Hand that is alone powerful to spare or to afflict, as seemeth good to Him who guides it.

Aurora awoke out of her long sleep while her father was at church. She awoke to find her husband watching her; the Sunday papers lying forgotten on his knee, and his honest eyes fixed on the face he loved.

"My own dear John," she said, as she lifted her head from the pillows, supporting herself upon her elbow, and stretching out one hand to Mr. Mellish, "my own dear boy, how happy we are together now! Will anything ever come to break our happiness again, my dear? Can Heaven be so cruel as to afflict us any more?"

The banker's daughter, in the sovereign vitality

of her nature, had rebelled against sorrow as a strange and unnatural part of her life. She had demanded happiness almost as a right; she had wondered at her afflictions, and been unable to understand why she should be thus afflicted. There are natures which accept suffering with patient meekness, and acknowledge the justice by which they suffer; but Aurora had never done this. Her joyous soul had revolted against sorrow, and she arose now in the intense relief which she felt in her release from the bonds that had been so hateful to her, and challenged Providence with her claim to be happy for evermore.

John Mellish thought very seriously upon this matter. He could not forget the night of the murder,—the night upon which he had sat alone in his wife's chamber pondering upon his unworthiness.

"Do you think we deserve to be happy, Lolly?" he said presently. "Don't mistake me, my darling. I know that you're the best and brightest of living creatures,—tender-hearted, loving, generous, and true. But do you think we take life quite seriously enough, Lolly dear? I'm sometimes afraid that we're too much like the

careless children in the pretty childish allegory, who played about amongst the flowers on the smooth grass in the beautiful garden, until it was too late to set out upon the long journey on the dark road which would have led them to Paradise. What shall we do, my darling, to deserve the blessings God has given us so freely; the blessings of youth and strength, and love and wealth? What shall we do, dear? I don't want to turn Mellish into a Philanstery exactly, nor to give up my racing-stud, if I can help it," John said reflectively; "but I want to do something, Lolly, to prove that I am grateful to Providence. Shall we build a lot of schools, or a church, or almshouses, or something of that sort? Lofthouse would like me to put up a painted window in Mellish church, and a new pulpit with a patent sounding-board; but I can't see that painted windows and sounding-boards do much good in a general way. I want to do something, Aurora, to prove my gratitude to the Providence that has given me the loveliest and best of women for my true-hearted wife."

The banker's daughter smiled almost mournfully upon her devoted husband.

"Have I been such a blessing to you, John," she said, "that you should be grateful for me? Have I not brought you far more sorrow than happiness, my poor dear?"

"No," shouted Mr. Mellish emphatically. "The sorrow you have brought me has been nothing to the joy I have felt in your love. My own dearest girl, to be sitting here by your side to-day, and to hear you tell me that you love me, is enough happiness to set against all the trouble of mind that I have endured since the man that is dead came to Mellish."

I hope my poor John Mellish will be forgiven if he talked a great deal of nonsense to the wife he loved. He had been her lover from the first moment in which he had seen her, darkly beautiful, upon the gusty Brighton Parade; and he was her lover still. No shadow of contempt had ever grown out of his familiarity with her. And indeed I am disposed to take objection to that old proverb; or at least to believe that contempt is only engendered of familiarity with things which are in themselves base and spurious. The priest, who is familiar with the altar, learns no contempt for its sacred images; but it is rather the ignorant

neophyte who sneers and sniggers at things which he cannot understand. The artist becomes only more reverent as toil and study make him more familiar with his art; its eternal sublimity grows upon him, and he worships the far-away Goddess of Perfection as humbly when he drops his brush or his chisel after a life of patient labour, as he did when first he ground colour or pointed rough blocks of marble for his master. And I cannot believe that a good man's respect for the woman he loves can be lessened by that sweet and every-day familiarity in which a hundred household virtues and gentle beauties—never dreamed of in the ball-rooms where he first danced with an unknown idol in gauzy robes and glimmering jewels—grow upon him, until he confesses that the wife of ten years' standing is even ten times dearer than the bride of a week's honeymoon.

Archibald Floyd came back from church, and found his two children sitting side by side in one of the broad windows, watching for his arrival, and whispering together like lovers, as I have said they were.

They dined pleasantly together later in the evening; and a little after dark the phaeton was

brought round to the terrace-steps, and Aurora kissed her father as she wished him good night.

"You will come up to town, and be present at the marriage, sir, I know," John whispered, as he took his father-in-law's hand. "Talbot Bulstrode will arrange all about it. It is to take place at some out-of-the-way little church in the City. Nobody will be any the wiser, and Aurora and I will go back to Mellish as quietly as possible. There's only Lofthouse and Hayward know the secret of the certificate, and they——"

John Mellish stopped suddenly. He remembered Mrs. Powell's parting sting. *She* knew the secret. But how could she have come by that knowledge? It was impossible that either Lofthouse or Hayward could have told her. They were both honourable men, and they had pledged themselves to be silent.

Archibald Floyd did not observe his son-in-law's embarrassment; and the phaeton drove away, leaving the old man standing on the terrace-steps looking after his daughter.

"I must shut up this place," he thought, "and go to Mellish to finish my days. I cannot endure these separations; I cannot bear this suspense.

It is a pitiful sham, my keeping house, and living in all this dreary grandeur. I'll shut up the place, and ask my daughter to give me a quiet corner in her Yorkshire home, and a grave in the parish churchyard."

The lodge-keeper turned out of his comfortable Gothic habitation to open the clanking iron gates for the phaeton; but John drew up his horses before they dashed into the road, for he saw that the man wanted to speak to him.

"What is it, Forbes?" he asked.

"Oh, it's nothing particular, sir," the man said, "and perhaps I oughtn't to trouble you about it; but did you expect any one down to-day, sir?"

"Expect any one here?—no!" exclaimed John.

"There's been a person inquirin', sir, this afternoon,—two persons, I may say, in a shay-cart, but one of 'em asked particular if you was here, sir, and if Mrs. Mellish was here; and when I said yes, you was, the gent says it wasn't worth troublin' you about—the business as he'd come upon—and as he'd call another time. And he asked me what time you'd be likely to be leavin' the Woods; and I said I made no doubt you'd

stay to dinner up at the house. So he says, 'All right,' and drives off."

"He left no message, then?"

"No, sir. He said nothin' more than what I've told you."

"Then his business could have been of no great importance, Forbes," answered John, laughing. "So we needn't worry our heads about him. Good-night."

Mr. Mellish dropped a five-shilling piece into the lodge-keeper's hand, gave Talbot's horses their heads, and the phaeton rolled off London-wards over the crisp gravel of the well-kept Beckenham roads.

"Who could the man have been?" Aurora asked, as they left the gates.

"Goodness knows, my dear," John answered carelessly. "Somebody on racing business, perhaps."

Racing business seems to be in itself such a mysterious business that it is no strange thing for mysterious people to be always turning up in relation to it. Aurora, therefore, was content to accept this explanation; but not without some degree of wonderment.

"I can't understand the man coming to Felden after you, John," she said. "How could he know that you were to be there to-day?"

"Ah, how indeed, Lolly!" returned Mr. Mellish. "He chanced it, I suppose. A sharp customer, no doubt; wants to sell a horse, I dare say, and heard I didn't mind giving a good price for a good thing."

Mr. Mellish might have gone even further than this, for there were many *horsey* gentlemen in his neighbourhood, past masters in the art they practised, who were wont to say that the young squire, judiciously manipulated, might be induced to give a remarkably good price for a very bad thing; and there were many broken-down, slim-legged horses in the Mellish stables that bore witness to the same fact. Those needy *chevaliers d'esprit* who think that Burke's landed gentry were created by Providence and endowed with the goods of this world for their especial benefit, just as pigeons are made plump and nice-eating for the delectation of hawks, drove a wholesale trade upon the young man's frank simplicity and hearty belief in his fellow-creatures. I think it is Eliza Cook who says, "It is better to trust and be deceived, than

own the mean, poor spirit that betrays;" and if there is any happiness in being "done," poor John enjoyed that fleeting delight pretty frequently.

There was a turn in the road between Beckenham and Norwood; and as the phaeton swept round, a chaise or dog-cart, a shabby vehicle enough, with a rakish-looking horse, drove close up, and the man who was driving asked the squire to put him in the nearest way to London. The vehicle had been behind them all the way from Felden, but had kept at a very respectful distance until now.

"Do you want to get to the City or the West End?" John asked.

"The West End."

"Then you can't do better than follow us," answered Mr. Mellish; "the road's clean enough, and your horse seems a good one to go. You can keep us in sight, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, and thank ye."

"All right, then."

Talbot Bulstrode's thorough-breds dashed off, but the rakish-looking horse kept his ground behind them. He had something of the insolent, off-hand assurance of a butcher's horse, accustomed

to whirl a bare-headed blue-coated master through the sharp morning air.

"I was right, Lolly," Mr. Mellish said, as he left the dog-cart behind.

"How do you mean, dear?" asked Aurora.

"The man who spoke to us just now is the man who has been inquiring for me at Felden. He's a Yorkshireman."

"A Yorkshireman!"

"Yes; didn't you hear the north-country twang?"

No: she had not listened to the man, nor heeded him. How should she think of anything but her new-born happiness—the new-born confidence between herself and the husband she loved?

Do not think her hard-hearted or cruel if she forgot that it was the death of a fellow-creature, a sinful man stricken down in the prime of youth and health, that had given her this welcome release. She had suffered so much, that the release could not be otherwise than welcome, let it come how it might.

Her nature, frank and open as the day, had been dwarfed and crippled by the secret that had blighted her life. Can it be wondered, then, that she rejoiced now that all need of secrecy was

over, and this generous spirit might expand as it pleased?

It was past ten when the phaeton turned into Halfmoon Street. The men in the dog-cart had followed John's directions to the letter; for it was only in Piccadilly that Mr. Mellish had lost sight of them amongst other vehicles travelling backwards and forwards on the lamp-lit thoroughfare.

Talbot and Lucy received their visitors in one of the pretty little drawing-rooms. The young husband and wife had spent a quiet day together; going to church in the morning and afternoon, dining alone, and sitting in the twilight, talking happily and confidentially. Mr. Bulstrode was no Sabbath-breaker; and John Mellish had reason to consider himself a peculiarly privileged person, inasmuch as the thorough-breds had been permitted to leave their stables for his service; to say nothing of the groom, who had been absent from his hard seat in the servants' pew at a fashionable chapel, in order that he might accompany John and Aurora to Felden.

The little party sat up rather late, Aurora and Lucy talking affectionately together, side by side, upon a sofa in the shadow of the room, while the

two men lounged in the open window. John told his host the history of the day, and in doing so casually mentioned the man who had asked him the way to London.

Strange to say, Talbot Bulstrode seemed especially interested in this part of the story. He asked several questions about the men. He asked what they were like; what was said by either of them; and made many other inquiries, which seemed equally trivial.

"Then they followed you into town, John?" he said finally.

"Yes; I only lost sight of them in Piccadilly, five minutes before I turned the corner of the street."

"Do you think they had any motive in following you?" asked Talbot.

"Well, I fancy so; they're on the look-out for information, I expect. The man who spoke to me looked something like a tout. I've heard that Lord Stamford's rather anxious about my West-Australian colt, the Pork Butcher. Perhaps his people have set these men to work to find out if I'm going to run him in the Leger."

Talbot Bulstrode smiled bitterly, almost mournfully, at the vanity of horse-flesh. It was painful

to see this light-hearted young squire looking in such ignorant hopefulness towards an horizon upon which graver and more thoughtful men could see a dreadful shadow lowering. Mr. Bulstrode was standing close to the balcony; he stepped out amongst the china boxes of mignonette, and looked down into the quiet street. A man was leaning against a lamp-post, some few paces from Talbot's house, smoking a cigar, and with his face turned towards the balcony. He finished his cigar deliberately, threw the end into the road, and walked away while Talbot kept watch; but Mr. Bulstrode did not leave his post of observation, and about a quarter of an hour afterwards he saw the same man lounging slowly along the pavement upon the other side of the street. John, who sat within the shadow of the window-curtains, lolling against them, and creasing their delicate folds with the heavy pressure of his broad back, was utterly unconscious of all this.

Early the next morning Mr. Bulstrode and Mr. Mellish took a Hansom cab, and rattled down to Doctors' Commons, where, for the second time in his life, John gave himself up to be fought for by white-aproned ecclesiastical touts, and eventually

obtained the Archbishop of Canterbury's gracious sanction of his marriage with Aurora, widow of James Conyers, only daughter of Archibald Floyd, banker. From Doctors' Commons the two gentlemen drove to a certain quiet, out-of-the-way church within the sound of Bow bells, but so completely hidden amongst piles of warehouses, top-heavy chimneys, sloping roofs, and other eccentricities of masonry, that any unhappy bridegroom, who had appointed to be married there, was likely enough to spend the whole of the wedding-day in futile endeavours to find the church-door. Here John discovered a mouldy clerk, who was fetched from some habitation in the neighbourhood with considerable difficulty, by a boy, who volunteered to accomplish anything under heaven for a certain copper consideration; and to this clerk Mr. Mellish gave notice of a marriage which was to take place upon the following day, by special licence.

"I'll take my second marriage-certificate back with me," John said, as he left the church; "and then I should like to see who'll dare to look me in the face, and tell me that my darling is not my own lawfully-wedded wife."

He was thinking of Mrs. Powell as he said this.

He was thinking of the pale, spiteful eyes that had looked at him, and of the woman's tongue that had stabbed him with all a little nature's great capacity for hate. He would be able to defy her now; he would be able to defy every creature in the world who dared to breathe a syllable against his beloved wife.

Early the next morning the marriage took place. Archibald Floyd, Talbot Bulstrode, and Lucy were the only witnesses; that is to say, the only witnesses with the exception of the clerk and the pew-opener, and a couple of men who lounged into the church when the ceremony was half over, and slouched about one of the side aisles, looking at the monuments, and talking to each other in whispers, until the parson took off his surplice, and John came out of the vestry with his wife upon his arm.

Mr. and Mrs. Mellish did not return to Half-moon Street; they drove straight to the Great Northern Station, whence they started by the afternoon express for Doncaster. John was anxious to return; for remember that he had left his household under very peculiar circumstances, and strange reports might have arisen in his absence.

The young squire would perhaps have scarcely thought of this, had not the idea been suggested to him by Talbot Bulstrode, who particularly urged upon him the expediency of returning immediately.

"Go back, John," said Mr. Bulstrode, "without an hour's unnecessary delay. If by any chance there should be some further disturbance about this murder, it will be much better for you, and Aurora too, to be on the spot. I will come down to Mellish myself in a day or two, and will bring Lucy with me, if you will allow me."

"Allow you, my dear Talbot!"

"I *will* come, then. Good-bye, and God bless you! Take care of your wife."

CHAPTER VIII.

CAPTAIN PRODDER GOES BACK TO DONCASTER.

Mr. Samuel Prodder, returning to London after having played his insignificant part in the tragedy at Mellish Park, found that city singularly dull and gloomy. He put up at some dismal boarding-house, situated amid a mazy labyrinth of brick and mortar between the Tower and Wapping, and having relations with another boarding-house in Liverpool. He took up his abode at this place, in which he was known and respected. He drank rum-and-water, and played cribbage with other seamen, made after the same pattern as himself. He even went to an East-End theatre upon the Saturday night after the murder, and sat out the representation of a nautical drama, which he would have been glad to have believed in, had it not promulgated such wild theories in the science of navigation, and exhibited such extraordinary ex-

periments in the manœuvring of the man-of-war, upon which the action of the play took place, as to cause the captain's hair to stand on end in the intensity of his wonder. The things people did upon that ship curdled Samuel Prodder's blood, as he sat in the lonely grandeur of the eighteenpenny boxes. It was quite a common thing for them to walk unhesitatingly through the bulwarks and disappear in what ought to have been the sea. The extent of browbeating and humiliation borne by the captain of that noble vessel; the amount of authority exercised by a sailor with loose legs; the agonies of sea-sickness, represented by a comic countryman, who had no particular business on board the gallant bark; the proportion of hornpipe-dancing and nautical ballad-singing gone through, as compared to the work that was done,—all combined to impress poor Samuel with such a novel view of her Majesty's naval service, that he was very glad when the captain who had been browbeaten suddenly repented of all his sins,—not without a sharp reminder from the prompter, who informed the *dramatis personæ* in a confidential voice that it was *parst* twelve, and they'd better cut it short,—joined the hands of the contumacious sailor and a

young lady in white muslin, and begged them to be 'appy.

It was in vain that the captain sought distraction from the one idea upon which he had perpetually brooded since the night of his visit to Mellish Park. He would be wanted in Yorkshire to tell what he knew of the dark history of that fatal night. He would be called upon to declare at what hour he had entered the wood, whom he had met there, what he had seen and heard there. They would extort from him that which he would have died rather than tell. They would cross-examine, and bewilder, and torment him, until he told them everything,—until he repeated, syllable by syllable, the passionate words that had been said,—until he told them how, within a quarter of an hour of the firing of the pistol, he had been the witness of a desperate scene between his niece and the murdered man,—a scene in which concentrated hate, vengeful fury, illimitable disdain and detestation had been expressed by her—by her alone:—the man had been calm and moderate enough. It was she who had been angry; it was she who had given loud utterance to her hate.

Now, by reason of one of those strange inconsis-

tencies common to weak human nature, the captain, though possessed night and day by a blind terror of being suddenly pounced upon by the minions of the law, and compelled to betray his niece's secret, could not rest in his safe retreat amid the labyrinths of Wapping, but must needs pine to return to the scene of the murder. He wanted to know the result of the inquest. The Sunday papers gave a very meagre account, only hinting darkly at suspected parties. He wanted to ascertain for himself what had happened at the inquest, and whether his absence had given rise to suspicion. He wanted to see his niece again,—to see her in the daylight, undisturbed by passion. He wanted to see this beautiful tigress in her calmer moods, if she ever had any calmer moods. Heaven knows the simple merchant-captain was well-nigh distracted as he thought of his sister Eliza's child, and the awful circumstances of his first and only meeting with her.

Was she—that which he feared people might be led to think her, if they heard the story of that scene in the wood? No, no, no!

She was his sister's child,—the child of that merry, impetuous little girl, who had worn a pinafore and

played hop-scotch. He remembered his sister flying into a rage with one Tommy Barnes for unfair practices in that very game, and upbraiding him almost as passionately as Aurora had upbraided the dead man. But if Tommy Barnes had been found strangled by a skipping-rope or shot dead from a pea-shooter in the next street a quarter of an hour afterwards, would Eliza's brother have thought that she must needs be guilty of the boy's murder? The captain had gone so far as to reason thus, in his trouble of mind. His sister Eliza's child would be likely to be passionate and impetuous; but his sister Eliza's child would be a generous, warm-hearted creature, incapable of any cruelty in either thought or deed. He remembered his sister Eliza boxing his ears on the occasion of his gouging out the eyes of her wax-doll; but he remembered the same dark-eyed child sobbing piteously at the spectacle of a lamb that a heartless butcher was dragging to the slaughter-house.

But the more seriously Captain Prodder revolved this question in his mind, the more decidedly his inclination pointed to Doncaster; and early upon that very morning on which the quiet marriage had taken place in the obscure

City church, he repaired to a magnificent Israelitish temple of fashion in the Minories, and there ordered a suit of such clothes as were most affected by elegant landsmen. The Israelitish salesman recommended something light and lively in the fancy-check line; and Mr. Prodder, submitting to that authority as beyond all question, invested himself in a suit which he had contemplated solemnly athwart a vast expanse of plate-glass, before entering the temple of the Graces. It was "Our aristocratic tourist," at seventy-seven shillings and sixpence, and was made of a fleecy and rather powdery-looking cloth; in which the hues of baked and unbaked bricks predominated over a more delicate hearthstone tint,—which latter the shopman declared to be a colour that West-End tailors had vainly striven to emulate.

The captain, dressed in "Our aristocratic tourist," which suit was of the ultra cut-away and peg-toppy order, and with his sleeves and trousers inflated by any chance summer's breeze, had perhaps more of the appearance of a tombola than is quite in accordance with a strictly artistic view of the human figure. In his desire to make himself utterly irrecognizable as the seafaring man

who had carried the tidings of the murder to Mellish Park, the captain had tortured himself by substituting a tight circular collar and a wisp of purple ribbon for the honest half-yard of snowy linen which it had been his habit to wear turned over the loose collar of his blue coat. He suffered acute agonies from this modern device, but he bore them bravely; and he went straight from the tailor's to the Great Northern Railway Station, where he took his ticket for Doncaster. He meant to visit that town as an aristocratic tourist; he would keep himself aloof from the neighbourhood of Mellish Park, but he would be sure to hear the result of the inquest, and he would be able to ascertain for himself whether any trouble had come upon his sister's child.

The sea-captain did not travel by that express which carried Mr. and Mrs. Mellish to Doncaster, but by an earlier and a slower train, which lumbered quietly along the road, conveying inferior persons, to whom time was not measured by a golden standard, and who smoked, and slept, and ate, and drank resignedly enough, through the eight or nine hours' journey.

It was dusk when Samuel Prodder reached the

quiet racing-town from which he had fled away in the dead of the night so short a time before. He left the station, and made his way to the market-place, and from the market-place he struck into a narrow lane that led him to an obscure street upon the outskirts of the town. He had a great terror of being led by some unhappy accident into the neighbourhood of the Reindeer, lest he should be recognized by some hanger-on of that hotel.

Half-way between the beginning of the straggling street and the point at which it dwindled and shrank away into a country lane, the captain found a little public-house called the Crooked Rabbit,—such an obscure and out-of-the-way place of entertainment that poor Samuel thought himself safe in seeking for rest and refreshment within its dingy walls. There was a framed-and-glazed legend of "good beds" hanging behind an opaque window-pane,—beds for which the landlord of the Crooked Rabbit was in the habit of asking and receiving almost fabulous prices during the great Leger week. But there seemed little enough doing at the humble tavern just now, and Captain Prodder walked boldly in, ordered a steak and a pint of ale, with a glass of rum-and-water,

hot, to follow, at the bar, and engaged one of the good beds for his accommodation. The landlord, who was a fat man, lounged with his back against the bar reading the sporting news in the 'Manchester Guardian;' and it was the landlady who took Mr. Prodder's orders and showed him the way into an awkwardly-shaped parlour, which was much below the rest of the house, and into which the uninitiated visitor was apt to precipitate himself head foremost, as into a well or pit. There where several small mahogany tables in this room, all adorned with sticky arabesques, formed by the wet impressions of the bottom rims of pewter pots; there were so many spittoons that it was almost impossible to walk from one end of the room to the other without taking unintentional foot-baths of sawdust; there was an old bagatelle-table, the cloth of which had changed from green to dingy yellow, and was frayed and tattered like a poor man's coat; and there was a low window, the sill of which was almost on a level with the pavement of the street.

The merchant-captain threw off his hat, loosened the slip of ribbon and the torturing circular collar supplied him by the Israelitish outfitter, and cast

himself into a shining mahogany arm-chair close to this window. The lower panes were shrouded by a crimson curtain, and he lifted this very cautiously and peered for a few moments into the street. It was lonely enough and quiet enough in the dusky summer's evening. Here and there lights twinkled in a shop window, and upon one threshold a man stood talking to his neighbour. With one thought always paramount in his mind, it is scarcely strange that Samuel Prodder should fancy these people must necessarily be talking of the murder.

The landlady brought the captain the steak he had ordered, and the tired traveller seated himself at one of the tables and discussed his simple meal. He had eaten nothing since seven o'clock that morning, and he made very short work of the three-quarters of a pound of meat that had been cooked for him. He finished his beer, drank his rum-and-water, smoked a pipe, and then, as he had the room still to himself, he made an impromptu couch of Windsor chairs arranged in a row, and, in his own *parlance*, turned-in upon this rough hammock to take a brief stretch.

He might have set his mind at rest, perhaps,

before this, had he chosen. He could have questioned the landlady about the murder at Mellish Park: she was likely to know as much as any one else he might meet at the Crooked Rabbit. But he had refrained from doing this because he did not wish to draw attention to himself in any way, as a person in the smallest degree interested in the murder. How did he know what inquiries had possibly been made for the missing witness? There was perhaps some enormous reward offered for his apprehension, and a word or a look might betray him to the greedy eyes of those upon the watch to obtain it.

Remember that this broad-shouldered seafaring man was as ignorant as a child of all things beyond the deck of his own vessel, and the watery highroads he had been wont to navigate. Life along shore was a solemn mystery to him,—the law of the British dominions a complication of inscrutable enigmas, only to be spoken of and thought of in a spirit of reverence and wonder. If anybody had told him that he was likely to be seized upon as an accessory before the fact, and hung out of hand for his passive part in the Mellish Park catastrophe, he would have believed them implicitly. How did he

know how many Acts of Parliament his conduct in leaving Doncaster without giving his evidence might come under? It might be high treason, lese-majesty,—anything in the world that is unpronounceable and awful,—for aught this simple sailor knew to the contrary. But in all this it was not his own safety that Captain Prodder thought of. That was of very little moment to this light-hearted, easy-going sailor. He had perilled his life too often on the high seas to set any exaggerated value upon it ashore. If they chose to hang an innocent man, they must do their worst; it would be their mistake, not his; and he had a simple seaman-like faith, rather vague, perhaps, and not very reduceable to anything like thirty-nine articles, which told him there were sweet little cherubs sitting up aloft who would take good care that any such sublunary mistake should be rectified in a certain supernal log-book, upon whose pages Samuel Prodder hoped to find himself set down as an honest and active sailor, always humbly obedient to the signals of his Commander.

It was for his niece's sake, then, that the sailor dreaded any discovery of his whereabouts; and it was for her sake that he resolved upon exercising

the greatest degree of caution of which his simple nature was capable.

"I won't ask a single question," he thought; "there's sure to be a pack of lubbers dropping in here, by-and-by, and I shall hear 'em talking about the business as likely as not. These country folks would have nothing to talk about if they didn't overhaul the ship's books of their betters."

The captain slept soundly for upwards of an hour, and was awakened at the end of that time by the sound of voices in the room, and the fumes of tobacco. The gas was flaring high in the low-roofed parlour when he opened his eyes, and at first he could scarcely distinguish the occupants of the room for the blinding glare of light.

"I won't get up," he thought; "I'll sham asleep for a bit, and see whether they happen to talk about the business."

There were only three men in the room. One of them was the landlord, whom Samuel Prodder had seen reading in the bar; and the other two were shabby-looking men, with by no means too respectable a stamp either upon their persons or their manners. One of them wore a velveteen cut-away coat with big brass buttons, knee-breeches,

blue stockings, and highlows. The other was a pale-faced man, with mutton-chop whiskers, and dressed in a shabby-genteel costume, that gave indication of general vagabondage rather than of any particular occupation.

They were talking of horses when Captain Prodder awoke, and the sailor lay for some time listening to a jargon that was utterly unintelligible to him. The men talked of Lord Zetland's lot, of Lord Glasgow's lot, and the Leger and the Cup, and made offers to bet with each other, and quarrelled about the terms, and never came to an agreement, in a manner that was utterly bewildering to poor Samuel; but he waited patiently, still feigning to be asleep, and not in any way disturbed by the men, who did not condescend to take any notice of him.

"They'll talk of the other business presently," he thought; "they're safe to talk of it."

Mr. Prodder was right.

After discussing the conflicting merits of half the horses in the racing calendar, the three men abandoned the fascinating subject; and the landlord re-entering the room after having left it to fetch a fresh supply of beer for his guests, asked if

either of them had heard if anything new had turned up about that business at Mellish Park.

"There's a letter in to-day's 'Guardian,'" he added, before receiving any reply to his question, "and a pretty strong one. It tries to fix the murder upon some one in the house, but it don't exactly name the party. It wouldn't be safe to do that yet awhile, I suppose."

Upon the request of the two men, the landlord of the Crooked Rabbit read the letter in the Manchester daily paper. It was a very clever letter, and a spirited one, giving a synopsis of the proceedings at the inquest, and commenting very severely upon the manner in which that investigation had been conducted. Mr. Prodder quailed until the Windsor chairs trembled beneath him as the landlord read one passage, in which it was remarked that the stranger who carried the news of the murder to the house of the victim's employer, the man who had heard the report of the pistol, and had been chiefly instrumental in the finding of the body, had not been forthcoming at the inquest.

"He had disappeared mysteriously and abruptly, and no efforts were made to find him," wrote the

correspondent of the 'Guardian.' "What assurance can be given for the safety of any man's life when such a crime as the Mellish Park murder is investigated in this loose and indifferent manner? The catastrophe occurred within the boundary of the Park fence. Let it be discovered whether any person in the Mellish household had a motive for the destruction of James Conyers. The man was a stranger to the neighbourhood. He was not likely, therefore, to have made enemies outside the boundary of his employer's estate, but he may have had some secret foe within that limit. Who was he? where did he come from? what were his antecedents and associations? Let each one of these questions be fully sifted, let a cordon be drawn round the house, and every creature living in it be held under the surveillance of the law until patient investigation has done its work, and such evidence has been collected as must lead to the detection of the guilty person."

To this effect was the letter which the landlord read in a loud and didactic manner, that was very imposing, though not without a few stumbles over some hard words, and a good deal of slap-dash jumping at others.

Samuel Prodder could make very little of the composition, except that it was perfectly clear he had been missed at the inquest, and his absence commented upon. The landlord and the shabby-genteel man talked long and discursively upon the matter; the man in the velveteen coat, who was evidently a thorough-bred cockney and only newly arrived in Doncaster, required to be told the whole story before he was upon a footing with the other two. He was very quiet, and generally spoke between his teeth, rarely taking the unnecessary trouble of removing his short clay-pipe from his mouth, except when it required refilling. He listened to the story of the murder very intently, keeping one eye upon the speaker and the other on his pipe, and nodding approvingly now and then in the course of the narrative.

He took his pipe from his mouth when the story was finished, and filled it from an india-rubber pouch, which had to be turned inside-out in some mysterious manner before the tobacco could be extricated from it. While he was packing the loose fragments of shag or bird's-eye neatly into the bowl of the pipe with his stumpy little finger, he said, with supreme carelessness—

"I know'd Jim Conyers."

"Did you now?" exclaimed the landlord, opening his eyes very wide.

"I know'd him," repeated the man, "as intimate as I know'd my own mother; and when I read of the murder in the newspaper last Sunday, you might have knocked me down with a feather. 'Jim's got it at last,' I said; for he was one of them coves that goes through the world cock-a-doodling over other people to sich a extent, that when they *do* drop in for it, there's not many particular sorry for 'em. He was one of your selfish chaps, this here; and when a chap goes through this life makin' it his leadin' principle to care about nobody, he mustn't be surprised if it ends by nobody carin' for him. Yes, I know'd Jim Conyers," added the man, slowly and thoughtfully, "and I know'd him under rather pecooliar circumstances."

The landlord and the other man pricked up their ears at this point of the conversation.

The trainer at Mellish Park had, as we know, risen to popularity from the hour in which he had fallen upon the dewy turf in the wood, shot through the heart.

"If there wasn't any particklar objections," the

landlord of the Crooked Rabbit said, presently, "I should uncommonly like to hear anything you've got to tell about the poor chap. There's a deal of interest took about the matter in Doncaster, and my customers have scarcely talked of anything else since the inquest."

The man in the velveteen coat rubbed his chin and smoked his pipe reflectively. He was evidently not a very communicative man; but it was also evident that he was rather gratified by the distinction of his position in the little public-house parlour.

This was no other than Mr. Matthew Harrison, the dog-fancier; Aurora's pensioner, the man who had traded upon her secret, and made himself the last link between her and the low-born husband she had abandoned.

Samuel Prodder lifted himself from the Windsor chairs at this juncture. He was too much interested in the conversation to be able to simulate sleep any longer. He got up, stretched his legs and arms, made elaborate show of having just awakened from a profound and refreshing slumber, and asked the landlord of the Crooked Rabbit to mix him another glass of that pine-apple-rum grog.

The captain lighted his pipe while his host departed upon this errand. The seaman glanced rather inquisitively at Mr. Harrison; but he was fain to wait until the conversation took its own course, and offered him a safe opportunity of asking a few questions.

"The pecooliar circumstances under which I know'd James Conyers," pursued the dog-fancier, after having taken his own time and smoked out half a pipeful of tobacco, to the acute aggravation of his auditory, "was a woman,—and a stunner she was, too; one of your regular spitfires, that'll knock you into the middle of next week if you so much as asks her how she does in a manner she don't approve of. She was a woman, she was, and a handsome one, too; but she was more than a match for James, with all his brass. Why, I've seen her great black eyes flash fire upon him," said Mr. Harrison, looking dreamily before him, as if he could even at that moment see the flashing eyes of which he spoke; "I've seen her look at him, as if she'd wither him up from off the ground he trod upon, with that contempt she felt for him."

Samuel Prodder grew strangely uneasy as he

listened to this man's talk of flashing black eyes and angry looks directed at James Conyers. Had he not seen his niece's shining orbs flame fire upon the dead man only a quarter of an hour before he received his death-wound? Only so long—Heaven help that wretched girl!—only so long before the man for whom she had expressed unmitigated hate had fallen by the hand of an unknown murderer.

"She must have been a tartar, this young woman of yours," the landlord observed to Mr. Harrison.

"She was a tartar," answered the dog-fancier: "but she was the right sort, too, for all that; and what's more, she was a kind friend to me. There's never a quarter-day goes by that I don't have cause to say so."

He poured out a fresh glass of beer as he spoke, and tossed the liquor down his capacious throat with the muttered sentiment, "Here's towards her."

Another man had entered the room while Mr. Prodder had sat smoking his pipe and drinking his rum-and-water, a hump-backed, white-faced man, who sneaked into the public-house parlour as if he

had no right to be there, and seated himself noiselessly at one of the tables.

Samuel Prodder remembered this man. He had seen him through the window in the lighted parlour of the north lodge when the body of James Conyers had been carried into the cottage. It was not likely, however, that the man had seen the captain.

"Why, if it isn't Steeve Hargraves from the Park!" exclaimed the landlord, as he looked round and recognized the "Softy"; "he'll be able to tell plenty, I dare say. We've been talking of the murder, Steeve," he added, in a conciliatory manner.

Mr. Hargraves rubbed his clumsy hands about his head, and looked furtively, yet searchingly, at each member of the little assembly.

"Ay, sure," he said; "folks don't seem to me to talk about owght else. It was bad enoogh oop at the Park; but it seems worse in Doncaster."

"Are you stayin' up town, Steeve?" asked the landlord, who seemed to be upon pretty intimate terms with the late hanger-on of Mellish Park.

"Yes, I'm stayin' oop town for a bit; I've been out of place since the business oop there; you

know how I was turned out of the house that had sheltered me ever since I was a boy, and you know who did it. Never mind that; I'm out o' place now, but you may draw me a mug of ale; I've money enough for that."

Samuel Prodder looked at the "Softy" with considerable interest. He had played a small part in the great catastrophe, yet it was scarcely likely that he should be able to throw any light upon the mystery. What was he but a poor half-witted hanger-on of the murdered man, who had lost all by his patron's untimely death?

The "Softy" drank his beer, and sat, silent, ungainly, and disagreeable to look upon, amongst the other men.

"There's a reg'lar stir in the Manchester papers about this murder, Steeve," the landlord said, by way of opening a conversation; "it don't seem to me as if the business was goin' to be let drop over-quietly. There'll be a second inquest, I reckon, or a examination, or a memorial to the Secretary of State, or summat o' that sort, before long."

The "Softy's" face, expressionless almost always, expressed nothing now but stolid indifference; the stupid indifference of a half-witted ignoramus, to

whose impenetrable intellect even the murder of his own master was a far-away and obscure event, not powerful enough to awaken any effort of attention.

"Yes; I'll lay there'll be a stir about it before long," the landlord continued. "The papers put it down very strong that the murder must have been done by some one in the house; by some one as had more knowledge of the man, and more reason to be angry against him, than strangers could have. Now you, Hargraves, were living at the place; you must have seen and heard things that other people haven't had the opportunity to hear. What do *you* think about it?"

Mr. Hargraves scratched his head reflectively.

"The papers are cleverer nor me," he said at last; "it wouldn't do for a poor fond chap like me to go agen such as them. I think what they think. I think it was some one about the pleace did it; some one that had good reason to be spiteful again him that's dead."

An imperceptible shudder passed over the "Softy's" frame as he alluded to the murdered man. It was strange with what gusto the other three men discussed the ghastly subject; returning

to it persistently in spite of every interruption, and in a manner licking their lips over its gloomiest details. It was surely more strange that they should do this, than that Stephen Hargraves should exhibit some reluctance to talk freely upon the dismal topic.

"And who do you think had cause to be spiteful agen him, Steeve?" asked the landlord. "Had him and Mr. Mellish fell out about the management of the stable?"

"Him and *Mr.* Mellish had never had an angry word pass between 'em, as I've heerd of," answered the "Softy."

He laid such a singular emphasis upon the word *Mr.* that the three men looked at him wonderingly, and Captain Prodder took his pipe from his mouth and grasped the back of a neighbouring chair as firmly as if he had entertained serious thoughts of flinging that trifle of furniture at the "Softy's" head.

"Who else could it have been, then, as had a spite against the man?" asked some one.

Samuel Prodder scarcely knew who it was who spoke, for his attention was concentrated upon Stephen Hargraves; and he never once removed

his gaze from the white face, and dull, blinking eyes.

"Who was it that went to meet him late at night in the north lodge?" whispered the "Softy." "Who was it that couldn't find words that was bad enough for him, or looks that was angry enough for him? Who was it that wrote him a letter,—I've got it, and I mean to keep it too,—askin' of him to be in the wood at such-and-such a time upon the very night of the murder? Who was it that met him there in the dark,—as others could tell as well as me? Who was it that did this?'

No one answered. The men looked at each other and at the "Softy" with open mouths, but said nothing. Samuel Prodder grasped the topmost bar of the wooden chair still more tightly, and his broad bosom rose and fell beneath his tourist waistcoat like a raging sea; but he sat in the shadow of the queerly-shaped room, and no one noticed him.

"Who was it that ran away from her own home and hid herself, after the inquest?" whispered the "Softy." "Who was it that was afraid to stop in her own house, but must run away to London without leaving word where she was gone

for anybody? Who was it that was seen upon the mornin' before the murder, meddlin' with her husband's guns and pistols, and was seen by more than me, as them that saw her will testify when the time comes? Who was this?"

Again there was no answer. The raging sea laboured still more heavily under Captain Prodder's waistcoat, and his grasp tightened, if it could tighten, on the rail of the chair; but he uttered no word. There was more to come, perhaps, yet; and he might want every chair in the room as instruments with which to appease his vengeance.

"You was talkin', when I just came in, a while ago, of a young woman in connection with Mr. James Conyers, sir," said the "Softy," turning to Matthew Harrison; "a black-eyed woman, you said; might she have been his wife?"

The dog-fancier started, and deliberated for a few moments before he answered.

"Well, in a manner of speaking, she was his wife," he said at last, rather reluctantly.

"She was a bit above him, loike—wasn't she?" asked the "Softy." "She had more money than she knew what to do with—eh?"

The dog-fancier stared at the questioner.

"You know who she was, I suppose?" he said suspiciously.

"I think I do," whispered Stephen Hargraves. "She was the daughter of Mr. Floyd, the rich banker oop in London; and she married our squire while her first husband was alive; and she wrote a letter to him that's dead, askin' of him to meet her upon the night of the murder."

Captain Prodder flung aside the chair. It was too poor a weapon with which to wreak his wrath; and with one bound he sprang upon the "Softy," seizing the astonished wretch by the throat, and overturning a table, with a heap of crashing glasses and pewter pots, that rolled away into the corners of the room.

"It's a lie!" roared the sailor; "you foul-mouthed hound! you know that it's a lie! Give me something," cried Captain Prodder; "give me something, somebody, and give it quick, that I may pound this man into a mash as soft as a soaked ship's biscuit; for if I use my fists to him I shall murder him, as sure as I stand here. It's my sister Eliza's child you want to slander, is it?

You'd better have kept your mouth shut while you was in her own uncle's company. I meant to have kep' quiet here," cried the captain, with a vague recollection that he had betrayed himself and his purpose; "but was I to keep quiet and hear lies told of my own niece? Take care," he added, shaking the "Softy," till Mr. Hargraves's teeth chattered in his head, "or I'll knock those crooked teeth of yours down your ugly throat, to hinder you from telling any more lies of my dead sister's only child."

"They weren't lies," gasped the "Softy," doggedly; "I said I've got the letter, and I have got it. Let me go, and I'll show it to you."

The sailor released the dirty wisp of cotton neckerchief by which he had held Stephen Hargraves; but he still retained a grasp upon his coat-collar.

"Shall I show you the letter?" asked the "Softy."

"Yes."

Mr. Hargraves fumbled in his pockets for some minutes, and ultimately produced a dirty scrap of crumpled paper.

It was the brief scrawl which Aurora had

written to James Conyers, telling him to meet her in the wood. The murdered man had thrown it carelessly aside after reading it, and it had been picked up by Stephen Hargraves.

He would not trust the precious document out of his own clumsy hands, but held it before Captain Prodder for inspection.

The sailor stared at it, anxious, bewildered, fearful; he scarcely knew how to estimate the importance of the wretched scrap of circumstantial evidence. There were the words, certainly, written in a bold, scarcely feminine, hand. But these words in themselves proved nothing until it could be proved that his niece had written them.

"How do I know as my sister Eliza's child wrote that?" he asked.

"Ay, sure; but she did though," answered the "Softy." "But, coom, let me go now, will you?" he added, with cringing civility; "I didn't know you was her uncle. How was I to know owght about it? I don't want to make any mischief agen Mrs. Mellish, though she's been no friend to me. I didn't say anything at the inquest, did I? though I might have said as much as I've said to-

night, if it comes to that, and have told no lies. But when folks bother *me* about him that's dead, and ask this and that and t'oother, and go on as if I had a right to know all about it, I'm free to tell my thoughts, I suppose? surely I'm free to tell my thoughts?"

"I'll go straight to Mr. Mellish, and tell him what you've said, you scoundrel!" cried the captain.

"Ay, do," whispered Stephen Hargraves maliciously; "there's some of it that'll be stale news to him, anyhow."

CHAPTER IX.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE WEAPON WITH WHICH JAMES CONYERS HAD BEEN SLAIN.

Mr. and Mrs. Mellish returned to the house in which they had been so happy; but it is not to be supposed that the pleasant country mansion could be again, all in a moment, the home that it had been before the advent of James Conyers the trainer, and the acting of the tragedy that had so abruptly concluded his brief service.

No; every pang that Aurora had felt, every agony that John had endured, had left a certain impress upon the scene in which it had been suffered. The subtle influences of association hung heavily about the familiar place. We are the slaves of such associations, and we are powerless to stand against their silent force. Scraps of colour and patches of gilding upon the walls will bear upon them, as plainly as if they were covered

with hieroglyphical inscriptions, the shadows of the thoughts of those who have looked upon them. Transient and chance effects of light or shade will recall the same effects, seen and observed—as Fagin observed the broken spike upon the guarded dock—in some horrible crisis of misery and despair. The commonest household goods and chattels will bear mute witness of your agonies: an easy-chair will say to you, "It was upon me you cast yourself in that paroxysm of rage and grief;" the pattern of a dinner-service may recall to you that fatal day on which you pushed your food untasted from you, and turned your face, like grief-stricken King David, to the wall. The bed you lay upon, the curtains that sheltered you, the pattern of the paper on the walls, the common every-day sounds of the household, coming muffled and far-away to that lonely room in which you hid yourself,—all these bear record of your sorrow, and of that hideous double action of the mind which impresses these things most vividly upon you at the very time when it would seem they should be most indifferent.

But every sorrow, every pang of wounded love, or doubt, or jealousy, or despair, is a fact—a fact

once, and a fact for ever; to be outlived, but very rarely to be forgotten; leaving such an impress upon our lives as no future joys can quite wear out. The murder has been done, and the hands are red. The sorrow has been suffered; and however beautiful Happiness may be to us, she can never be the bright virginal creature she once was; for she has passed through the valley of the shadow of death, and we have discovered that she is not immortal.

It is not to be expected, then, that John Mellish and his wife Aurora could feel quite the same in the pretty chambers of the Yorkshire mansion as they had felt before the first shipwreck of their happiness. They had been saved from peril and destruction, and landed, by the mercy of Providence, high and dry upon the shore that seemed to promise them pleasure and security henceforth. But the memory of the tempest was yet new to them; and upon the sands that were so smooth today they had seen yesterday the breakers beating with furious menace, and hurrying onward to destroy them.

The funeral of the trainer had not yet taken place, and it was scarcely a pleasant thing for

Mr. Mellish to remember that the body of the murdered man still lay, stark and awful, in the oak coffin that stood upon trestles in the rustic chamber at the north lodge.

"I'll pull that place down, Lolly," John said, as he turned away from an open window, through which he could see the Gothic chimneys of the trainer's late habitation glimmering redly above the trees. "I'll pull the place down, my pet. The gates are never used, except by the stable-boys; I'll knock them down, and the lodge too, and build some loose boxes for the brood-mares with the materials. And we'll go away to the south of France, darling, and run across to Italy, if you like, and forget all about this horrid business."

"The funeral will take place to-morrow, John, will it not?" Aurora asked.

"To-morrow, dear!—to-morrow is Wednesday, you know. It was upon Thursday night that——"

"Yes, yes," she answered, interrupting him. "I know; I know."

She shuddered as she spoke, remembering the ghastly circumstances of the night to which he alluded; remembering how the dead man had

stood before her, strong in health and vitality, and had insolently defied her hatred. Away from Mellish Park, she had only remembered that the burden of her life had been removed from her, and that she was free. But here—here upon the scene of the hideous story—she recollected the manner of her release; and that memory oppressed her even more terribly than her old secret, her only sorrow.

She had never seen or known in this man, who had been murdered, one redeeming quality, one generous thought. She had known him as a liar, a schemer, a low and paltry swindler, a selfish spendthrift, extravagant to wantonness upon himself, but meaner than words could tell towards others; a profligate, a traitor, a glutton, a drunkard. This is what she had found behind her school-girl's fancy for a handsome face, for violet-tinted eyes, and soft-brown curling hair. Do not call her hard, then, if sorrow had no part in the shuddering horror she felt as she conjured up the image of him in his death-hour, and saw the glazing eyes turned angrily upon her. She was little more than twenty; and it had been her fate always to take the wrong step, always to be misled by the vague

finger-posts upon life's high-road, and to choose the longest, and crookedest, and hardest way towards the goal she sought to reach.

Had she, upon the discovery of her first husband's infidelity, called the law to her aid,—she was rich enough to command its utmost help, though Sir Cresswell Cresswell did not then keep the turnpike upon such a royal road to divorce as he does now,—she might have freed herself from the hateful chains so foolishly linked together, and might have defied this dead man to torment or assail her.

But she had chosen to follow the counsel of expediency, and it had led her upon the crooked way through which I have striven to follow her. I feel that there is much need of apology for her. Her own hands had sown the dragon's teeth, from whose evil seed had sprung up armed men, strong enough to rend and devour her. But then, if she had been faultless, she could not have been the heroine of this story; for I think some wise man of old remarked, that the perfect women were those who left no histories behind them, but went through life upon such a tranquil course of quiet well-doing as left no footprints on the sands of

time; only mute records hidden here and there, deep in the grateful hearts of those who had been blest by them.

The presence of the dead man within the boundary of Mellish Park made itself felt throughout the household that had once been such a jovial one. The excitement of the catastrophe had passed away, and only the dull gloom remained —a sense of oppression not to be cast aside. It was felt in the servants' hall, as well as in Aurora's luxurious apartments. It was felt by the butler as well as by the master. No worse deed of violence than the slaughter of an unhappy stag, who had rushed for a last refuge to the Mellish Park flower-garden, and had been run down by furious hounds upon the velvet lawn, had ever before been done within the boundary of the young squire's home. The house was an old one, and had stood, gray and ivy-shrouded, through the perilous days of civil war. There were secret passages, in which loyal squires of Mellish Park had hidden from ferocious Roundheads bent upon riot and plunder. There were broad hearth-stones, upon which sturdy blows had been given and exchanged by strong men in leathern jerkins and clumsy iron-heeled

boots; but the Royalist Mellish had always ultimately escaped,—up a chimney, or down a cellar, or behind a curtain of tapestry; and the wicked Praise-the-Lord Thompsons, and Smiter-of-the-Philistines Joneses, had departed after plundering the plate-chest and emptying the wine-barrels. There had never before been set upon the place in which John Mellish had first seen the light, the red hand of MURDER.

It was not strange, then, that the servants sat long over their meals, and talked in solemn whispers of the events of the past week. There was more than the murder to talk about. There was the flight of Mrs. Mellish from beneath her husband's roof upon the very day of the inquest. It was all very well for John to give out that his wife had gone up to town upon a visit to her cousin, Mrs. Bulstrode. Such ladies as Mrs. Mellish do not go upon visits without escort, without a word of notice, without the poorest pretence of bag and baggage. No; the mistress of Mellish Park had fled away from her home under the influence of some sudden panic. Had not Mrs. Powell said as much, or hinted as much? for when did that lady-like creature ever vulgarize her opinions by

stating them plainly? The matter was obvious. Mr. Mellish had taken, no doubt, the wisest course: he had pursued his wife and had brought her back, and had done his best to hush up the matter; but Aurora's departure had been a flight, —a sudden and unpremeditated flight.

The lady's-maid,—ah, how many handsome dresses, given to her by a generous mistress, lay neatly folded in the girl's boxes on the second story!—told how Aurora had come to her room, pale and wild-looking, and had dressed herself unassisted for that hurried journey, upon the day of the inquest. The girl liked her mistress, loved her, perhaps; for Aurora had a wondrous and almost dangerous faculty for winning the love of those who came near her; but it was so pleasant to have something to say about this all-absorbing topic, and to be able to make oneself a feature in the solemn conclave. At first they had talked only of the murdered man, speculating upon his life and history, and building up a dozen theoretical views of the murder. But the tide had turned now, and they talked of their mistress; not connecting her in any positive or openly expressed manner with the murder, but commenting upon

the strangeness of her conduct, and dwelling much upon those singular coincidences by which she had happened to be roaming in the park upon the night of the catastrophe, and to run away from her home on the day of the inquest.

"It *was* odd, you know," the cook said; "and them black-eyed women are generally regular spirity ones. *I* shouldn't like to offend Master John's wife. Do you remember how she paid into t' 'Softy'?"

"But there was naught o' sort between her and the trainer, was there?" asked some one.

"I don't know about that. But 'Softy' said she hated him like poison, and that there was no love lost between 'em."

But why should Aurora have hated the dead man? The ensign's widow had left the sting of her venom behind her, and had suggested to these servants, by hints and innuendos, something so far more base and hideous than the truth, that I will not sully these pages by recording it. But Mrs. Powell had of course done this foul thing without the utterance of one ugly word that could have told against her gentility, had it been repeated aloud in a crowded drawing-room. She

had only shrugged her shoulders, and lifted her straw-coloured eyebrows, and sighed half regretfully, half deprecatingly; but she had blasted the character of the woman she hated as shamefully as if she had uttered a libel too gross for Holywell Street. She had done a wrong that could only be undone by the exhibition of the blood-stained certificate in John's keeping, and the revelation of the whole story connected with that fatal scrap of paper. She had done this before packing her boxes; and she had gone away from the house that had sheltered her, well-pleased at having done this wrong; and comforting herself yet further by the intention of doing more mischief through the medium of the penny post.

It is not to be supposed that the Manchester paper, which had caused so serious a discussion in the humble parlour of the Crooked Rabbit, had been overlooked in the servants' hall at Mellish Park. The Manchester journals were regularly forwarded to the young squire from that metropolis of cotton-spinning and horse-racing; and the mysterious letter in the 'Guardian' had been read and commented upon. Every creature in

that household, from the fat housekeeper, who had kept the keys of the store-room through nearly three generations, to the rheumatic trainer, Langley, had a certain interest in the awful question. A nervous footman turned pale as that passage was read which declared that the murder had been committed by some member of the household; but I think there were some younger and more adventurous spirits—especially a pretty housemaid, who had seen the thrilling drama of 'Susan Hopley' performed at the Doncaster theatre during the spring meeting—who would have rather liked to be accused of the crime, and to emerge spotless and triumphant from the judicial ordeal, through the evidence of an idiot, or a magpie, or a ghost, or some other witness common and popular in criminal courts.

Did Aurora know anything of all this? No; she only knew that a dull and heavy sense of oppression in her own breast made the very summer atmosphere floating in at the open windows seem stifling and poisonous; that the house, which had once been so dear to her, was as painfully and perpetually haunted by the ghastly presence of the murdered man, as if the dead

trainer had stalked palpably about the corridors wrapped in a blood-stained winding-sheet.

She dined with her husband alone in the great dining-room. They were very silent at dinner, for the presence of the servants sealed their lips upon the topic that was uppermost in their minds. John looked anxiously at his wife every now and then, for he saw that her face had grown paler since her arrival at Mellish; but he waited until they were alone before he spoke.

"My darling," he said, as the door closed behind the butler and his subordinate, "I am sure you are ill. This business has been too much for you."

"It is the air of this house that seems to oppress me, John," answered Aurora. "I had forgotten all about this dreadful business while I was away. Now that I have come back, and find that the time which has been so long to me—so long in misery and anxiety, and so long in joy, my own dear love, through you—is in reality only a few days, and that the murdered man still lies near us, I—; I shall be better when—when the funeral is over, John."

"My poor darling, I was a fool to bring you

back. I should never have done so, but for Talbot's advice. He urged me so strongly to come back directly. He said that if there should be any disturbance about the murder, we ought to be upon the spot."

"Disturbance! What disturbance?" cried Aurora.

Her face blanched as she spoke, and her heart sank within her. What further disturbance could there be? Was the ghastly business as yet unfinished, then? She knew—alas! only too well—that there could be no investigation of this matter which would not bring her name before the world linked with the name of the dead man. How much she had endured in order to keep that shameful secret from the world! How much she had sacrificed in the hope of saving her father from humiliation! And now, at the last, when she had thought that the dark chapter of her life was finished, the hateful page blotted out, —now, at the very last, there was a probability of some new disturbance which would bring her name and her history into every newspaper in England.

"Oh, John, John!" she cried, bursting into a

passion of hysterical sobs, and covering her face with her clasped hands; "am I never to hear the last of this? Am I never, never, never to be released from the consequences of my miserable folly?"

The butler entered the room as she said this; she rose hurriedly, and walked to one of the windows, in order to conceal her face from the man.

"I beg your pardon, sir," the old servant said; "but they've found something in the park, and I thought perhaps you might like to know——"

"They've found something! What?" exclaimed John, utterly bewildered between his agitation at the sight of his wife's grief and his endeavour to understand the man.

"A pistol, sir. One of the stable-lads found it just now. He went to the wood with another boy to look at the place where—the—the man was shot; and he's brought back a pistol he found there. It was close against the water, but hid away among the weeds and rushes. Whoever threw it there, thought, no doubt, to throw it in the pond; but Jim, that's one of the boys, fancied he saw something glitter, and sure

enough it was the barrel of a pistol ; and I think must be the one that the trainer was shot with, Mr. John."

"A pistol!" cried Mr. Mellish ; "let me see it."

His servant handed him the weapon. It was small enough for a toy, but none the less deadly in a skilful hand. It was a rich man's fancy, deftly carried out by some cunning gunsmith, and enriched by elaborate inlaid work of purple steel and tarnished silver. It was rusty, from exposure to rain and dew ; but Mr. Mellish knew the pistol well, for it was his own.

It was his own ; one of his pet playthings ; and it had been kept in the room which was only entered by privileged persons,—the room in which his wife had busied herself with the rearrangement of his guns upon the day of the murder.

CHAPTER X.

UNDER A CLOUD.

Talbot Bulstrode and his wife came to Mellish Park a few days after the return of John and Aurora. Lucy was pleased to come to her cousin; pleased to be allowed to love her without reservation; grateful to her husband for his gracious goodness in setting no barrier between her and the friend she loved.

And Talbot,—who shall tell the thoughts that were busy in his mind, as he sat in a corner of the first-class carriage, to all outward appearance engrossed in the perusal of a 'Times' leader?

I wonder how much of the Thunderer's noble Saxon English Mr. Bulstrode comprehended that morning! The broad white paper on which the 'Times' is printed serves as a convenient screen for a man's face. Heaven knows what agonies have been sometimes endured behind that printed

mask! A woman, married, and a happy mother, glances carelessly enough at the Births and Marriages and Deaths, and reads perhaps that the man she loved, and parted with, and broke her heart for, fifteen or twenty years before, has fallen, shot through the heart, far away upon an Indian battle-field. She holds the paper firmly enough before her face; and her husband goes on with his breakfast, and stirs his coffee, or breaks his egg, while she suffers her agony,—while the comfortable breakfast-table darkens and goes away from her, and the long-ago day comes back upon which the cruel ship left Southampton, and the hard voices of well-meaning friends held forth monotonously upon the folly of improvident marriages. Would it not be better, by-the-by, for wives to make a practice of telling their husbands all the sentimental little stories connected with the pre-matrimonial era? Would it not be wiser to gossip freely about Charles's dark eyes and moustache, and to hope that the poor fellow is getting on well in the Indian service, than to keep a skeleton, in the shape of a phantom ensign in the 87th, hidden away in some dark chamber of the feminine memory?

But other than womanly agonies are suffered behind the 'Times.' The husband reads bad news of the railway company in whose shares he has so rashly invested that money which his wife believes safely lodged in the jog-trot, three-per-cent.-yielding Consols. The dashing son, with Newmarket tendencies, reads evil tidings of the horse he has backed so boldly, perhaps at the advice of a Manchester prophet, who warranted putting his friends in the way of winning a hatful of money for the small consideration of three-and-sixpence in postage-stamps. Visions of a book that it will not be very easy to square; of a black list of play or pay engagements; of a crowd of angry book-men clamorous for their dues, and not slow to hint at handy horse-ponds, and possible tar and feathers, for defaulting swells and sneaking "welshers"; all these things flit across the disorganized brain of the young man, while his sisters are entreating to be told whether the 'Crown Diamonds' is to be performed that night, and if "dear Miss Pyne" will warble Rode's air before the curtain falls. The friendly screen hides his face; and by the time he has looked for the Covent Garden advertisements, and given the re-

quired information, he is able to set the paper down and proceed calmly with his breakfast, pondering ways and means as he does so.

Lucy Bulstrode read a High-Church novel, while her husband sat with the 'Times' before his face, thinking of all that had happened to him since he had first met the banker's daughter. How far away that old love-story seemed to have receded since the quiet domestic happiness of his life had begun in his marriage with Lucy! He had never been false, in the remotest shadow of a thought, to his second love; but now that he knew the secret of Aurora's life, he could but look back and wonder how he should have borne that cruel revelation if John's fate had been his; if he had trusted the woman he loved in spite of the world, in spite of her own strange words, which had so terribly strengthened his worst fears, so cruelly redoubled his darkest doubts.

"Poor girl!" he thought; "it was scarcely strange that she should shrink from telling that humiliating story. I was not tender enough. I confronted her in my obstinate and pitiless pride. I thought of myself rather than of her, and of her sorrow. I was barbarous and ungentlemanly;

and then I wondered that she refused to confide in me."

Talbot Bulstrode, reasoning after the fact, saw the weak points of his conduct with a preternatural clearness of vision, and could not repress a sharp pang of regret that he had not acted more generously. There was no infidelity to Lucy in this thought. He would not have exchanged his devoted little wife for the black-browed divinity of the past, though an all-powerful fairy had stood at his side ready to cancel his nuptials and tie a fresh knot between him and Aurora. But he was a gentleman, and he felt that he had grievously wronged, insulted and humiliated a woman whose worst fault had been the trusting folly of an innocent girl.

"I left her on the ground in that room at Felden," he thought,—"kneeling on the ground, with her beautiful head bowed down before me. O my God, can I ever forget the agony of that moment! Can I ever forget what it cost me to do that which I thought was right!"

The cold perspiration broke out upon his forehead as he remembered that bygone pain, as it may do with a cowardly person who recalls too

vividly the taking out of a three-pronged double-tooth, or the cutting off of a limb.

"John Mellish was ten times wiser than I," thought Mr. Bulstrode; "he trusted to his instinct, and recognized a true woman when he met her. I used to despise him at Rugby because he couldn't construe Cicero. I never thought he'd live to be wiser than me."

Talbot Bulstrode folded the 'Times' newspaper, and laid it down in the empty seat by his side. Lucy shut the third volume of her novel. How should she care to read when it pleased her husband to desist from reading?

"Lucy," said Mr. Bulstrode, taking his wife's hand (they had the carriage to themselves—a piece of good fortune which often happens to travellers who give the guard half-a-crown),—"Lucy, I once did your cousin a great wrong; I want to atone for it now. If any trouble, which no one yet foresees, should come upon her, I want to be her friend. Do you think I am right in wishing this, dear?"

"Right, Talbot!"

Mrs. Bulstrode could only repeat the word in unmitigated surprise. When did she ever

think him anything but the truest and wisest and most perfect of created beings?

Everything seemed very quiet at Mellish when the visitors arrived. There was no one in the drawing-room, nor in the smaller room within the drawing-room; the venetians were closed, for the day was close and sultry; there were vases of fresh flowers upon the tables; but there were no open books, no litter of frivolous needlework or drawing-materials, to indicate Aurora's presence.

"Mr. and Mrs. Mellish expected you by the later train, I believe, sir," the servant said, as he ushered Talbot and his wife into the drawing-room.

"Shall I go and look for Aurora?" Lucy said to her husband. "She is in the morning-room, I dare say."

Talbot suggested that it would be better, perhaps, to wait till Mrs. Mellish came to them. So Lucy was fain to remain where she was. She went to one of the open windows, and pushed the shutters apart. The blazing sunshine burst into the room, and drowned it in light. The smooth lawn was aflame with scarlet geraniums and standard roses, and all manner of gaudily-

coloured blossoms; but Mrs. Bulstrode looked beyond this vividly-tinted *parterre* to the thick woods, that loomed darkly purple against the glowing sky.

It was in that very wood that her husband had declared his love for her; the same wood that had since been outraged by violence and murder.

"The—the man is buried, I suppose, Talbot?" she said to her husband.

"I believe so, my dear."

"I should never care to live in this place again, if I were Aurora."

The door opened before Mrs. Bulstrode had finished speaking, and the mistress of the house came towards them. She welcomed them affectionately and kindly, taking Lucy in her arms, and greeting her very tenderly; but Talbot saw that she had changed terribly within the few days that had passed since her return to Yorkshire, and his heart sank as he observed her pale face and the dark circles about her hollow eyes.

Could she have heard——? Could anybody have given her reason to suppose——?

"You are not well, Mrs. Mellish," he said, as he took her hand.

"No, not very well. This oppressive weather makes my head ache."

"I am sorry to see you looking ill. Where shall I find John?" asked Mr. Bulstrode.

Aurora's pale face flushed suddenly.

"I—I—don't know," she stammered. "He is not in the house; he has gone out—to the stables—or to the farm, I think. I'll send for him."

"No, no," Talbot said, intercepting her hand on its way to the bell. "I'll go and look for him. Lucy will be glad of a chat with you, I dare say, Aurora, and will not be sorry to get rid of me."

Lucy, with her arm about her cousin's waist, assented to this arrangement. She was grieved to see the change in Aurora's looks, the unnatural constraint of her manner.

Mr. Bulstrode walked away, hugging himself upon having done a very wise thing.

"Lucy is a great deal more likely to find out what is the matter than I am," he thought. "There is a sort of freemasonry between women,

an electric affinity, which a man's presence always destroys. How deathly pale Aurora looks! Can it be possible that the trouble I expected has come so soon?"

He went to the stables, but not so much to look for John Mellish as in the hope of finding somebody intelligent enough to furnish him with a better account of the murder than any he had yet heard.

"Some one else, as well as Aurora, must have had a reason for wishing to get rid of this man," he thought. "There must have been some motive: revenge,—gain,—something which no one has yet fathomed."

He went into the stable-yard; but he had no opportunity of making his investigation, for John Mellish was standing in a listless attitude before a small forge, watching the shoeing of one of his horses. The young squire looked up with a start as he recognized Talbot, and gave him his hand, with a few straggling words of welcome. Even in that moment Mr. Bulstrode saw that there was perhaps a greater change in John's appearance than in that of Aurora. The Yorkshireman's blue eyes had lost their brightness, his step its

elasticity; his face seemed sunken and haggard, and he evidently avoided meeting Talbot's eye. He lounged listlessly away from the forge, walking at his guest's side in the direction of the stable-gates; but he had the air of a man who neither knows nor cares whither he is going.

"Shall we go to the house?" he said. "You must want some luncheon after your journey." He looked at his watch as he said this. It was half-past three, an hour after the usual time for luncheon at Mellish.

"I've been in the stables all the morning," he said. "We're busy making our preparations for the York Summer."

"What horses do you run?" Mr. Bulstrode asked, politely affecting to be interested in a subject that was utterly indifferent to him, in the hope that stable-talk might rouse John from his listless apathy.

"What horses!" repeated Mr. Mellish vaguely. "I—I hardly know. Langley manages all that for me, you know; and—I—I forget the names of the horses he proposed, and——"

Talbot Bulstrode turned suddenly upon his friend, and looked him full in the face. They

had left the stables by this time, and were in a shady pathway that led through a shrubbery towards the house.

"John Mellish," he said, "this is not fair towards an old friend. You have something on your mind, and you are trying to hide it from me."

The squire turned away his head.

"I have something on my mind, Talbot," he said quietly. "If you could help me, I'd ask your help more than any man's. But you can't —you can't!"

"But suppose I think I *can* help you?" cried Mr. Bulstrode. "Suppose I mean to try and do so, whether you will or no? I think I can guess what your trouble is, John; but I thought you were a braver man than to give way under it; I thought you were just the sort of man to struggle through it nobly and bravely, and to get the better of it by your own strength of will."

"What do you mean!" exclaimed John Mellish. "You can guess—you know—you thought! Have you no mercy upon me, Talbot Bulstrode? Can't you see that I'm almost mad, and that this is no time for you to force your sympathy upon

me? Do you want me to betray myself? Do you want me to betray——"

He stopped suddenly, as if the words had choked him, and, passionately stamping his foot upon the ground, walked on hurriedly, with his friend still by his side.

The dining-room looked dreary enough when the two men entered it, although the table gave promise of a very substantial luncheon; but there was no one to welcome them, or to officiate at the banquet.

John seated himself wearily in a chair at the bottom of the table.

"You had better go and see if Mrs. Bulstrode and your mistress are coming to luncheon," he said to a servant, who left the room with his master's message, and returned three minutes afterwards to say that the ladies were not coming.

The ladies were seated side by side upon a low sofa in Aurora's morning-room. Mrs. Mellish sat with her head upon her cousin's shoulder. She had never had a sister, remember; and gentle Lucy stood in place of that near and tender comforter. Talbot was perfectly right; Lucy had ac-

complished that which he would have failed to bring about. She had found the key to her cousin's unhappiness.

"Ceased to love you, dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Bulstrode, echoing the words that Aurora had last spoken. "Impossible!"

"It is true, Lucy," answered Mrs. Mellish, despairingly. "He has ceased to love me. There is a black cloud between us now, now that all secrets are done away with. It is very bitter for me to bear, Lucy; for I thought we should be so happy and united. But—but it is only natural. He feels the degradation so much. How can he look at me without remembering who and what I am? The widow of his groom! Can I wonder that he avoids me?"

"Avoids you, dear?"

"Yes, avoids me. We have scarcely spoken a dozen words to each other since the night of our return. He was so good to me, so tender and devoted during the journey home, telling me again and again that this discovery had not lessened his love, that all the trial and horror of the past few days had only shown him the great strength of his affection; but on the night of our

return, Lucy, he changed—changed suddenly and inexplicably; and now I feel that there is a gulf between us that can never be passed again. He is alienated from me for ever!"

"Aurora, all this is impossible," remonstrated Lucy. "It is your own morbid fancy, darling."

"My fancy!" cried Aurora bitterly. "Ah, Lucy, you cannot know how much I love my husband, if you think that I could be deceived in one look or tone of his. Is it my fancy that he averts his eyes when he speaks to me? Is it my fancy that his voice changes when he pronounces my name? Is it my fancy that he roams about the house like a ghost, and paces up and down his room half the night through? If these things are my fancy, Heaven have mercy upon me, Lucy; for I must be going mad."

Mrs. Bulstrode started as she looked at her cousin. Could it be possible that all the trouble and confusion of the past week or two had indeed unsettled this poor girl's intellect?

"My poor Aurora!" she murmured, smoothing the heavy hair away from her cousin's tearful eyes: "my poor darling! how is it possible that John should change towards you? He loved you

so dearly, so devotedly; surely nothing could alienate him from you."

"I used to think so, Lucy," Aurora murmured in a low, heart-broken voice; "I used to think nothing could ever come to part us. He said he would follow me to the uttermost end of the world; he said that no obstacle on earth should ever separate us; and now——"

She could not finish the sentence, for she broke into convulsive sobs, and hid her face upon her cousin's shoulder, staining Mrs. Bulstrode's pretty silk dress with her hot tears.

"Oh, my love, my love!" she cried piteously, "why didn't I run away and hide myself from you? why didn't I trust to my first instinct, and run away from you for ever? Any suffering would be better than this! any suffering would be better than this!"

Her passionate grief merged into a fit of hysterical weeping, in which she was no longer mistress of herself. She had suffered for the past few days more bitterly than she had ever suffered yet. Lucy understood all that. She was one of those people whose tenderness instinctively comprehends the griefs of others. She knew how to

treat her cousin; and in less than an hour after this emotional outbreak Aurora was lying on her bed, pale and exhausted, but sleeping peacefully. She had carried the burden of her sorrow in silence during the past few days, and had spent sleepless nights in brooding over her trouble. Her conversation with Lucy had unconsciously relieved her, and she slumbered calmly after the storm. Lucy sat by the bed watching the sleeper for some time, and then stole on tiptoe from the room.

She went, of course, to tell her husband all that had passed, and to take counsel from his sublime wisdom.

She found Talbot in the drawing-room alone; he had eaten a dreary luncheon in John's company, and had been hastily left by his host immediately after the meal. There had been no sound of carriage-wheels upon the gravelled drive all that morning; there had been no callers at Mellish Park since John's return; for a horrible scandal had spread itself throughout the length and breadth of the county, and those who spoke of the young squire and his wife talked in solemn under-tones, and gravely demanded of each other

whether some serious step should not be taken about the business which was uppermost in every body's mind.

Lucy told Talbot all that Aurora had said to her. This was no breach of confidence in the young wife's code of morality; for were not she and her husband immutably one, and how *could* she have any secret from him?

"I thought so!" Mr. Bulstrode said, when Lucy had finished her story.

"You thought what, dear?"

"That the breach between John and Aurora was a serious one. Don't look so sorrowful, my darling. It must be our business to reunite these divided lovers. You shall comfort Aurora, Lucy; and I'll look after John."

Talbot Bulstrode kissed his little wife, and went straight away upon his friendly errand. He found John Mellish in his own room,—the room in which Aurora had written to him upon the day of her flight; the room from which the murderous weapon had been stolen by some unknown hand. John had hidden the rusty pistol in one of the locked drawers of his Davenport; but it was not to be supposed that the fact of its discovery could

be locked up or hidden away. *That* had been fully discussed in the servants' hall; and who shall doubt that it had travelled further, percolating through some of those sinuous channels which lead away from every household?

"I want you to come for a walk with me, Mr. John Mellish," said Talbot, imperatively; "so put on your hat, and come into the park. You are the most agreeable gentleman I ever had the honour to visit, and the attention you pay your guests is really something remarkable."

Mr. Mellish made no reply to this speech. He stood before his friend, pale, silent, and sullen. He was no more like the hearty Yorkshire squire whom we have known, than he was like Viscount Palmerston or Lord Clyde. He was transformed out of himself by some great trouble that was preying upon his mind; and being of a transparent and childishly truthful disposition, was unable to disguise his anguish.

"John, John!" cried Talbot, "we were little boys together at Rugby, and have backed each other in a dozen childish fights. Is it kind of you to withhold your friendship from me now, when I

have come here on purpose to be a friend to you —to you and to Aurora?"

John Mellish turned away his head as his friend mentioned that familiar name; and the gesture was not lost upon Mr. Bulstrode.

"John, why do you refuse to trust me?"

"I don't refuse. I——Why did you come to this accursed house?" cried John Mellish, passionately; "why did you come here, Talbot Bulstrode? You don't know the blight that is upon this place, and those who live in it, or you would have no more come here than you would willingly go to a plague-stricken city. Do you know that since I came back from London not a creature has called at this house? Do you know that when I and—and—my wife—went to church on Sunday, the people we knew sneaked away from our path as if we had just recovered from typhus fever? Do you know that the cursed gaping rabble come from Doncaster to stare over the park-palings, and that this house is a show to half the West Riding? Why do you come here? You will be stared at, and grinned at, and scandalized,—you, who——Go back to London to-night, Talbot, if you don't want to drive me mad."

"Not till you trust me with your troubles, John," answered Mr. Bulstrode firmly. "Put on your hat, and come out with me. I want you to show me the spot where the murder was done."

"You may get some one else to show it you," muttered John, sullenly; "I'll not go there!"

"John Mellish!" cried Talbot suddenly, "am I to think you a coward and a fool? By the heaven that's above me, I shall think so if you persist in this nonsense. Come out into the park with me; I have the claim of past friendship upon you, and I'll not have that claim set aside by any folly of yours."

The two men went out upon the lawn, John complying moodily enough with his friend's request, and walked silently across the park towards that portion of the wood in which James Conyers had met his death. They had reached one of the loneliest and shadiest avenues in this wood, and were, in fact, close against the spot from which Samuel Prodder had watched his niece and her companion on the night of the murder, when Talbot stopped suddenly, and laid his hand on the squire's shoulder.

"John," he said, in a determined tone, "before we go to look at the place where this bad man died, you must tell me your trouble."

Mr. Mellish drew himself up proudly, and looked at the speaker with gloomy defiance lowering upon his face.

"I will tell no man that which I do not choose to tell," he said firmly; and then with a sudden change that was terrible to see, he cried impetuously, "Why do you torment me, Talbot? I tell you that I can't trust you—I can't trust any one upon earth. If—if I told you—the horrible thought that—if I told you, it would be your duty to—I—Talbot, Talbot, have pity upon me—let me alone—go away from me—I——"

Stamping furiously, as if he would have trampled down the cowardly despair for which he despised himself, and beating his forehead with his clenched fists, John Mellish turned away from his friend, and, leaning against the gnarled branch of a great oak, wept aloud. Talbot Bulstrode waited till the paroxysm had passed away before he spoke again; but when his friend had grown calmer, he linked his arm about him, and drew him away almost as tenderly as if the big Yorkshireman had been some

sorrowing woman, sorely in need of manly help and comfort.

"John, John," he said gravely, "thank God for this; thank God for anything that breaks the ice between us. I know what your trouble is, poor old friend, and I know that you have no cause for it. Hold up your head, man, and look straightforward to a happy future. I know the black thought that has been gnawing at your poor foolish manly heart: *you think that Aurora murdered the groom!*"

John Mellish, started, shuddering convulsively.

"No, no," he gasped; "who said so—who said——?"

"You think this, John," continued Talbot Bulstrode; "and you do her the most grievous wrong that ever yet was done to woman; a more shameful wrong than I committed when I thought that Aurora Floyd had been guilty of some base intrigue."

"You don't know——" stammered John.

"I don't know! I know all, and foresaw trouble for you, before *you* saw the cloud that was in the sky. But I never dreamt of this. I thought the foolish country people would suspect your wife, as

it always pleases people to try and fix a crime upon the person in whom that crime would be more particularly atrocious. I was prepared for this; but to think that you—you, John, who should have learned to know your wife by this time—to think that you should suspect the woman you have loved of a foul and treacherous murder!"

"How do we know that the—that the man was murdered?" cried John vehemently. "Who says that the deed was treacherously done? He may have goaded her beyond endurance, insulted her generous pride, stung her to the very quick, and in the madness of her passion—having that wretched pistol in her possession—she may——"

"Stop!" interrupted Talbot. "What pistol? you told me the weapon had not been found."

"It was found upon the night of our return."

"Yes; but why do you associate this weapon with Aurora? What do you mean by saying that the pistol was in her possession?"

"Because—O my God! Talbot, why do you wring these things from me?"

"For your own good, and for the justification of an innocent woman; so help me, Heaven!" answered Mr. Bulstrode. "Do not be afraid to be

candid with me, John. Nothing would ever make me believe Aurora Mellish guilty of this crime."

The Yorkshireman turned suddenly towards his friend, and leaning upon Talbot Bulstrode's shoulder, wept for the second time during that woodland ramble.

"May God in heaven bless you for this, Talbot!" he cried passionately. "Ah, my love, my dear, what a wretch I have been to you! but Heaven is my witness that, even in my worst agony of doubt and horror, my love has never lessened. It never could!—it never could!"

"John, old fellow," said Mr. Bulstrode, cheerfully, "perhaps, instead of talking this nonsense, which leaves me entirely in the dark as to everything that has happened since you left London, you will do me the favour to enlighten me as to the cause of these foolish suspicions."

They had reached the ruined summer-house and the pool of stagnant water, on the margin of which James Conyers had met with his death. Mr. Bulstrode seated himself upon a pile of broken timber, while John Mellish paced up and down the smooth patch of turf between the summer-house and the water, and told, disjointedly enough, the

story of the finding of the pistol, which had been taken out of his room.

"I saw that pistol upon the day of the murder," he said. "I took particular notice of it; for I was cleaning my guns that morning, and I left them all in confusion while I went down to the lodge to see the trainer. When I came back—I——"

"Well, what then?"

"Aurora had been setting my guns in order."

"You argue, therefore, that your wife took the pistol?"

John looked piteously at his friend; but Talbot's grave smile reassured him.

"No one else had permission to go into the room," he answered. "I keep my papers and accounts there, you know; and it's an understood thing that none of the servants are allowed to go there, except when they clean the room."

"To be sure! But the room is not locked, I suppose?"

"Locked! of course not!"

"And the windows—which open to the ground—are sometimes left open, I dare say?"

"Almost always in such weather as this."

"Then, my dear John, it may be just possible

that some one who had not permission to enter the room did, nevertheless, enter it, for the purpose of abstracting this pistol. Have you asked Aurora why she took upon herself to rearrange your guns?—she had never done such a thing before, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, very often. I'm rather in the habit of leaving them about after cleaning them; and my darling understands all about them as well as I do. She has often put them away for me."

"Then there was nothing particular in her doing so upon the day of the murder. Have you asked her how long she was in your room, and whether she can remember seeing this particular pistol, among others?"

"Ask her!" exclaimed John; "how could I ask her, when——"

"When you have been mad enough to suspect her. No, my poor old friend; you made the same mistake that I committed at Felden. You presupposed the guilt of the woman you loved; and you were too great a coward to investigate the evidence upon which your suspicions were built. Had I been wise enough, instead of blindly questioning this poor bewildered girl, to tell her

plainly what it was that I suspected, the incontrovertible truth would have flashed out of her angry eyes, and one indignant denial would have told me how basely I had wronged her. You shall not make the mistake that I made, John. You must go frankly and fearlessly to the wife you love, tell her of the suspicion that over-clouds her fame, and implore her to help you to the uttermost of her power in unravelling the mystery of this man's death. The assassin *must* be found, John; for so long as he remains undiscovered, you and your wife will be the victims of every penny-a-liner who finds himself at a loss for a paragraph."

"Yes," Mr. Mellish answered bitterly, "the papers have been hard at it already; and there's been a fellow hanging about the place for the last few days whom I've had a very strong inclination to thrash. Some reporter, I suppose, come to pick up information."

"I suppose so," Talbot answered thoughtfully; "what sort of a man was he?"

"A decent-looking fellow enough; but a Londoner, I fancy, and — stay!" exclaimed John suddenly, "there's a man coming towards us from

the turnstile, and unless I'm considerably mistaken, it's the very fellow."

Mr. Mellish was right.

The wood was free to any foot-passenger who pleased to avail himself of the pleasant shelter of spreading beeches, and the smooth carpet of mossy turf, rather than tramp wearily upon the dusty highway.

The stranger advancing from the turnstile was a decent-looking person, dressed in dark tight-fitting clothes, and making no unnecessary or ostentatious display of linen, for his coat was buttoned tightly to the chin. He looked at Talbot and John as he passed them,—not insolently, or even inquisitively, but with one brightly rapid and searching glance, which seemed to take in the most minute details in the appearance of both gentlemen. Then, walking on a few paces, he stopped and looked thoughtfully at the pond, and the bank above it.

"This is the place, I think, gentlemen?" he said, in a frank and rather free-and-easy manner.

Talbot returned his look with interest.

"If you mean the place where the murder was committed, it is," he said.

"Ah, I understood so," answered the stranger, by no means abashed.

He looked at the bank, regarding it, now from one point, now from another, like some skilful upholsterer taking the measure of a piece of furniture. Then walking slowly round the pond, he seemed to plumb the depth of the stagnant water with his small gray eyes.

Talbot Bulstrode watched the man as he took this mental photograph of the place. There was a business-like composure in his manner, which was entirely different to the eager curiosity of a scandalmonger and a busybody.

Mr. Bulstrode rose as the man walked away, and went slowly after him.

"Stop where you are, John," he said, as he left his companion; "I'll find out who this fellow is."

He walked on, and overtook the stranger at about a hundred yards from the pond.

"I want to have a few words with you before you leave the Park, my friend," he said quietly: "unless I'm very much mistaken, you are a member of the detective police, and come here with credentials from Scotland Yard."

The man shook his head, with a quiet smile.

"I'm not obliged to tell everybody my business," he answered coolly; "this footpath is a public thoroughfare, I believe?"

"Listen to me, my good fellow," said Mr. Bulstrode. "It may serve your purpose to beat about the bush; but I have no reason to do so, and therefore may as well come to the point at once. If you are sent here for the purpose of discovering the murderer of James Conyers, you can be more welcome to no one than to the master of that house."

He pointed to the Gothic chimneys as he spoke.

"If those who employ you have promised you a liberal reward, Mr. Mellish will willingly treble the amount they may have offered you. He would not give you cause to complain of his liberality, should you succeed in accomplishing the purpose of your errand. If you think you will gain anything by underhand measures, and by keeping yourself dark, you are very much mistaken; for no one can be better able or more willing to give you assistance in this than Mr. and Mrs. Mellish."

The detective—for he had tacitly admitted the fact of his profession—looked doubtfully at Talbot Bulstrode.

"You're a lawyer, I suppose?" he said.

"I am Mr. Talbot Bulstrode, member of Penruthy, and the husband of Mrs. Mellish's first cousin."

The detective bowed.

"My name is Joseph Grimstone, of Scotland Yard and Ball's Pond," he said; "and I certainly see no objection to our working together. If Mr. Mellish is prepared to act on the square, I'm prepared to act with him, and to accept any reward his generosity may offer. But if he or any friend of his wants to hoodwink Joseph Grimstone, he'd better think twice about the game before he tries it on; that's all."

Mr. Bulstrode took no notice of this threat, but looked at his watch before replying to the detective.

"It's a quarter-past six," he said. "Mr. Mellish dines at seven. Can you call at the house, say at nine, this evening? You shall then have all the assistance it is in our power to give you."

"Certainly, sir. At nine this evening."

"We shall be prepared to receive you. Good afternoon."

Mr. Grimstone touched his hat, and strolled

quietly away under the shadow of the beeches, while Talbot Bulstrode walked back to rejoin his friend.

It may be as well to take this opportunity of stating the reason of the detective's early appearance at Mellish Park. Upon the day of the inquest, and consequently the next day but one after the murder, two anonymous letters, worded in the same manner, and written by the same hand, were received respectively by the head of the Doncaster constabulary and by the chief of the Scotland-Yard detective confederacy.

These anonymous communications—written in a hand which, in spite of all attempt at disguise, still retained the spidery peculiarities of feminine caligraphy—pointed, by a sinuous and inductive process of reasoning, at Aurora Mellish as the murderess of James Conyers. I need scarcely say that the writer was no other than Mrs. Powell. She has disappeared for ever from my story, and I have no wish to blacken a character which can ill afford to be slandered. The ensign's widow actually believed in the guilt of her beautiful patroness. It is so easy for an envious woman to believe horrible things of the more prosperous sister whom she hates.

CHAPTER XI.

REUNION.

"We are on the verge of a precipice," Talbot Bulstrode thought, as he prepared for dinner in the comfortable dressing-room allotted to him at Mellish,—"we are on the verge of a precipice, and nothing but a bold grapple with the worst can save us. Any reticence, any attempt at keeping back suspicious facts, or hushing up awkward coincidences would be fatal to us. If John had made away with this pistol with which the deed was done, he would have inevitably fixed a most fearful suspicion upon his wife. Thank God I came here to-day! We must look matters straight in the face, and our first step must be to secure Aurora's help. So long as she is silent as to her share in the events of that day and night, there is a link missing in the chain, and we are all at sea.

John must speak to her to-night; or perhaps it will be better for me to speak."

Mr. Bulstrode went down to the drawing-room, where he found his friend pacing up and down, solitary and wretched.

"The ladies are going to dine up-stairs," said Mr. Mellish, as Talbot joined him. "I have just had a message to say so. Why does she avoid me, Talbot? why does my wife avoid me like this? We have scarcely spoken to each other for days."

"Shall I tell you why, you foolish John?" answered Mr. Bulstrode. "Your wife avoids you because you have chosen to alienate yourself from her, and because she thinks, poor girl, that she has lost your affection. She fancies that the discovery of her first marriage has caused a revulsion of feeling, and that you no longer love her."

"No longer love her!" cried John. "O my God! she ought to know that, if I could give my life for her fifty times over, I would do it, to save her one pang. I would do it, so help me, Heaven, though she were the guiltiest wretch that had ever crawled the earth!"

"But no one asks you to do anything of the

kind," said Mr. Bulstrode. "You are only requested to be reasonable and patient, to put a proper trust in Providence, and to be guided by people who are rather less impetuous than your ungovernable self."

"I will do what you like, Talbot; I will do what you like."

Mr. Mellish pressed his friend's hand. Had he ever thought, when he had seen Talbot an accepted lover at Felden, and had hated him with a savage and wild Indian-like fury, that he would come to be thus humbly grateful to him; thus pitifully dependent upon his superior wisdom? He wrung the young politician's hand, and promised to be as submissive as a child beneath his guidance.

In compliance, therefore, with Talbot's commands, he ate a few morsels of fish, and drank a couple of glasses of sherry; and having thus gone through a show of dining, he went with Mr. Bulstrode to seek Aurora.

She was sitting with her cousin in the morning-room, looking terribly pale in the dim dusk of the August evening,—pale and shadowy in her loose white muslin dress. She had only lately risen after a long feverish slumber, and had pretended

to dine out of courtesy to her guest. Lucy had tried in vain to comfort her cousin. This passionate, impetuous, spoiled child of fortune and affection refused all consolation, crying out again and again that she had lost her husband's love, and that there was nothing left for her upon earth.

But in the very midst of one of these despondent speeches, she sprang up from her seat, erect and trembling, with her parted lips quivering and her dark eyes dilated, startled by the sound of a familiar step, which within the last few days had been seldom heard in the corridor outside her room. She tried to speak, but her voice failed her; and in another moment the door had been dashed open by a strong hand, and her husband stood in the room, holding out his arms and calling to her.

"Aurora! Aurora! my own dear love, my own poor darling!"

She was folded to his breast before she knew that Talbot Bulstrode stood close behind him.

"My own darling," John said, "my own dearest, you cannot tell how cruelly I have wronged you. But, oh, my love, the wrong has

brought unendurable torture with it. My poor guiltless girl! how could I—how could I—— But I was mad, and it was only when Talbot——"

Aurora lifted her head from her husband's breast and looked wonderingly into his face, utterly unable to guess the meaning of these broken sentences.

Talbot laid his hand upon his friend's shoulder. "You will frighten your wife if you go on in this manner, John," he said quietly. "You mustn't take any notice of his agitation, my dear Mrs. Mellish. There is no cause, believe me, for all this outcry. Will you sit down by Lucy and compose yourself? It is eight o'clock, and between this and nine we have some serious business to settle."

"Serious business!" repeated Aurora vaguely. She was intoxicated by her sudden happiness. She had no wish to ask any explanation of the mystery of the past few days. It was all over, and her faithful husband loved her as devotedly and tenderly as ever. How could she wish to know more than this?

She seated herself at Lucy's side, in obedience to Talbot; but she still held her husband's hand,

she still looked in his face, for the moment most supremely unconscious that the scheme of creation included anything beyond this stalwart Yorkshireman.

Talbot Bulstrode lighted the lamp upon Aurora's writing-table,—a shaded lamp, which only dimly illuminated the twilight room,—and then, taking his seat near it, said gravely—

"My dear Mrs. Mellish, I shall be compelled to say something which I fear may inflict a terrible shock upon you. But this is no time for reservation; scarcely a time for ordinary delicacy. Will you trust in the love and friendship of those who are around you, and promise to bear this new trial bravely? I believe and hope that it will be a very brief one."

Aurora looked wonderingly at her husband, not at Talbot.

"A new trial?" she said inquiringly.

"You know that the murderer of James Conyers has not yet been discovered?" said Mr. Bulstrode.

"Yes, yes; but what of that?"

"My dear Mrs. Mellish, my dear Aurora! the world is apt to take a morbid delight in horrible

ideas. There are some people who think that you are guilty of this crime!"

"*I!*"

She rose suddenly from her low seat, and turned her face towards the lamplight, with a look of such blank amazement, such utter wonder and bewilderment, that had Talbot Bulstrode until that moment believed her guilty, he must thenceforth and for ever have been firmly convinced of her innocence.

"*I!*" she repeated.

Then turning to her husband, with a sudden alteration in her face, that blank amazement changing to a look of sorrow, mingled with reproachful wonder, she said in a low voice—

"*You* thought this of me, John; *you* thought this!"

John Mellish bowed his head before her.

"I did, my dear," he murmured—"God forgive me for my wicked folly—I did think this, Aurora. But I pitied you, and was sorry for you, my own dear love; and when I thought it most, I would have died to save you from shame or sorrow. My love has never changed, Aurora; my love has never changed."

She gave him her hand, and once more resumed her seat. She sat for some moments in silence, as if trying to collect her thoughts, and to understand the meaning of this strange scene.

"Who suspects me of this crime?" she said presently. "Has any one else suspected me? Any one besides—my husband?"

"I can scarcely tell you, my dear Mrs. Mellish," answered Talbot; "when an event of this kind takes place, it is very difficult to say who may or may not be suspected. Different persons set up different theories: one man writes to a newspaper to declare that, in his opinion, the crime was committed by some person within the house; another man writes as positively to another paper, asserting that the murderer was undoubtedly a stranger. Each man brings forward a mass of suppositious evidence in favour of his own argument, and each thinks a great deal more of proving his own cleverness than of furthering the ends of justice. No shadow of slander must rest upon this house, or upon those who live in it. It is necessary, therefore, imperatively necessary, that the real murderer should be found. A

London detective is already at work. These men are very clever; some insignificant circumstance, forgotten by those most interested in discovering the truth, would often be enough to set a detective on the right track. This man is coming here at nine o'clock; and we are to give him all the assistance we can. Will you help us, Aurora?"

"Help you! How?"

"By telling us all you know of the night of the murder. Why were you in the wood that night?"

"I was there to meet the dead man."

"For what purpose?"

Aurora was silent for some moments, and then looking up with a bold, half-defiant glance, she said suddenly—

"Talbot Bulstrode, before you blame or despise me, remember how the tie that bound me to this man had been broken. The law would have set me free from him, if I had been brave enough to appeal to the law; and was I to suffer all my life because of the mistake I had made in not demanding a release from the man whose gross infidelity entitled me to be divorced from him? Heaven knows I had borne with him

patiently enough. I had endured his vulgarity, his insolence, his presumption; I had gone penniless while he spent my father's money in a gambling-booth on a race-course, and dinnerless while he drank champagne with cheats and reprobates. Remember this, when you blame me most. I went into the wood that night to meet him for the last time upon this earth. He had promised me that he would emigrate to Australia upon the payment of a certain sum of money."

"And you went that night to pay it to him?" cried Talbot eagerly.

"I did. He was insolent, as he always was; for he hated me for having discovered that which shut him out from all claim upon my fortune. He hated himself for his folly in not having played his cards better. Angry words passed between us; but it ended in his declaring his intention of starting for Liverpool early the next morning, and—"

"You gave him the money?"

"Yes."

"But tell me,—tell me, Aurora," cried Talbot, almost too eager to find words, "how long had you left him when you heard the report of the pistol?"

"Not more than ten minutes."

"John Mellish," exclaimed Mr. Bulstrode, "was there any money found upon the person of the murdered man?"

"No—yes; I believe there was a little silver," Mr. Mellish answered vaguely.

"A little silver!" cried Talbot contemptuously. "Aurora, what was the sum you gave James Conyers upon the night of his death?"

"Two thousand pounds."

"In a cheque?"

"No; in notes."

"And that money has never been heard of since?"

No; John Mellish declared that he had never heard of it.

"Thank God!" exclaimed Mr. Bulstrode; "we shall find the murderer."

"What do you mean?" asked John.

"Whoever killed James Conyers, killed him in order to rob him of the money that he had upon him at the time of his death."

"But who could have known of the money?" asked Aurora.

"Anybody; the pathway through the wood is a public thoroughfare. Your conversation with

the murdered man may have been overheard. You talked about the money, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Thank God, thank God! Ask your wife's pardon for the cruel wrong you have done her, John, and then come downstairs with me. It's past nine, and I dare say Mr. Grimstone is waiting for us. But stay,—one word, Aurora. The pistol with which this man was killed was taken from this house, from John's room. Did you know that?"

"No; how should I know it?" Mrs. Mellish asked naïvely.

"That fact is against the theory of the murder having been committed by a stranger. Is there any one of the servants whom you could suspect of such a crime, John?"

"No," answered Mr. Mellish decisively; "not one."

"And yet the person who committed the murder must have been the person who stole your pistol. You, John, declare that very pistol to have been in your possession upon the morning before the murder."

"Most certainly."

"You put John's guns back into their places upon that morning, Aurora," said Mr. Bulstrode; "do you remember seeing that particular pistol?"

"No," Mrs. Mellish answered; "I should not have known it from the others."

"You did not find any of the servants in the room that morning?"

"Oh, no," Aurora answered immediately; "Mrs. Powell came into the room while I was there. She was always following me about; and I suppose she had heard me talking to——"

"Talking to whom?"

"To James Conyers's hanger-on and messenger, Stephen Hargraves—the 'Softy,' as they call him."

"You were talking to him? Then this Stephen Hargraves was in the room that morning?"

"Yes; he brought me a message from the murdered man, and took back my answer."

"Was he alone in the room?"

"Yes; I found him there when I went in, expecting to find John. I dislike the man,—unjustly, perhaps; for he is a poor, half-witted creature, who I dare say scarcely knows right from wrong; and I was angry at seeing him. He must have come in through the window."

A servant entered the room at this moment. He came to say that Mr. Grimstone had been waiting below for some time, and was anxious to see Mr. Bulstrode.

Talbot and John went down-stairs together. They found Mr. Joseph Grimstone sitting at a table in a comfortable room that had lately been sacred to Mrs. Powell, with the shaded lamp drawn close to his elbow, and a greasy little memorandum-book open before him. He was thoughtfully employed making notes in this memorandum-book with a stumpy morsel of lead-pencil —when do these sort of people begin their pencils, and how is it that they always seem to have arrived at the stump?—when the two gentlemen entered.

John Mellish leaned against the mantel-piece, and covered his face with his hand. For any practical purpose, he might as well have been in his own room. He knew nothing of Talbot's reason for this interview with the detective officer. He had no shadowy idea, no growing suspicion shaping itself slowly out of the confusion and obscurity, of the identity of the murderer. He only knew that his Aurora was innocent; that she

had indignantly refuted his base suspicion; and that he had seen the truth, radiant as the light of inspiration, shining out of her beautiful face.

Mr. Bulstrode rang, and ordered a bottle of sherry for the delectation of the detective; and then, in a careful and business-like manner, he recited all that he had been able to discover upon the subject of the murder. Joseph Grimstone listened very quietly, following Talbot Bulstrode with a shining track of lead-pencil hieroglyphics over the greasy paper, just as Tom Thumb strewed crumbs of bread in the forest-pathway, with a view to his homeward guidance. The detective only looked up now and then to drink a glass of sherry, and smack his lips with the quiet approval of a connoisseur. When Talbot had told all that he had to tell, Mr. Grimstone thrust the memorandum-book into a very tight breast-pocket, and taking his hat from under the chair upon which he had been seated, prepared to depart.

"If this information about the money is quite correct, sir," he said, "I think I can see my way through the affair; that is, if we can have the numbers of the notes. I can't stir a peg without the numbers of the notes."

Talbot's countenance fell. Here was a death-blow. Was it likely that Aurora, that impetuous and unbusiness-like girl, had taken the numbers of the notes, which, in utter scorn and loathing, she had flung as a last bribe to the man she hated?

"I'll go and make inquiries of Mrs. Mellish," he said; "but I fear it is scarcely likely I shall get the information you want."

He left the room; but five minutes afterwards returned triumphant.

"Mrs. Mellish had the notes from her father," he said. "Mr. Floyd took a list of the numbers before he gave his daughter the money."

"Then if you'll be so good as to drop Mr. Floyd a line, asking for that list by return of post, I shall know how to act," replied the detective. "I haven't been idle this afternoon, gentlemen, any more than you. I went back after I parted with you, Mr. Bulstrode, and had another look at the pond. I found something to pay me for my trouble."

He took from his waistcoat-pocked a small object, which he held between his finger and thumb.

Talbot and John looked intently at this dingy

object, but could make nothing out of it. It seemed to be a mere disc of rusty metal.

"It's neither more nor less than a brass button," the detective said, with a smile of quiet superiority; "maker's name, Crosby, Birmingham. There's marks upon it which seem uncommon like blood; and unless I'm very much mistaken, it'll be found to fit pretty correct into the barrel of your pistol, Mr. Mellish. So what we've got to do is to find a gentleman wearin', or havin' in his possession, a waistcoat with buttons by Crosby, Birmingham, and one button missin'; and if we happen to find the same gentleman changin' one of the notes that Mr. Floyd took the numbers of, I don't think we shall be *very* far off layin' our hands on the man we want."

With which oracular speech Mr. Grimstone departed, charged with a commission to proceed forthwith to Doncaster, to order the immediate printing and circulating of a hundred bills, offering a reward of 200*l.* for such information as would lead to the apprehension of the murderer of James Conyers. This reward to be given by Mr. Mellish, and to be over and above any reward offered by the Government.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BRASS BUTTON BY CROSBY, BIRMINGHAM.

Mr. Matthew Harrison and Captain Prodder were both accommodated with suitable entertainment at the sign of the Crooked Rabbit; but while the dog-fancier appeared to have ample employment in the neighbourhood,—employment of a mysterious nature, which kept him on the tramp all day, and sent him home at sunset, tired and hungry, to his hostelry,—the sailor, having nothing whatever to do, and a great burden of care upon his mind, found the time hang very heavily upon his hands; although, being naturally of a social and genial temper, he made himself very much at home in his strange quarters. From Mr. Harrison the captain obtained much information respecting the secret of all the sorrow that had befallen his niece. The dog-fancier had

known James Conyers from his boyhood; had known his father, the "swell" coachman of a Brighton Highflyer, or Sky-rocket, or Electric, and the associate of the noblemen and gentlemen of that princely era, in which it was the right thing for the youthful aristocracy to imitate the manners of Mr. Samuel Weller, senior. Matthew Harrison had known the trainer in his brief and stormy married life, and had accompanied Aurora's first husband as a humble dependent and hanger-on in that foreign travel which had been paid for out of Archibald Floyd's cheque-book. The honest captain's blood boiled as he heard that shameful story of treachery and extortion practised upon an ignorant school-girl. Oh, that he had been by to avenge those outrages upon the child of the dark-eyed sister he had loved! His rage against the undiscovered murderer of the dead man was redoubled when he remembered how comfortably James Conyers had escaped from his vengeance.

Mr. Stephen Hargraves, the "Softy," took good care to keep out of the way of the Crooked Rabbit, having no wish to encounter Captain Prodder a second time; but he still hung about

the town of Doncaster, where he had a lodging up a wretched alley, hidden away behind one of the back streets,—a species of lair common to every large town, only to be found by the inhabitants of the locality.

The "Softy" had been born and bred, and had lived his life, in such a narrow radius, that the uprooting of one of the oaks in Mellish Park could scarcely be a slower or more painful operation than the severing of those ties of custom which held the boorish hanger-on to the neighbourhood of the household in which he had so long been an inmate. But now that his occupation at Mellish Park was for ever gone, and his patron, the trainer, dead, he was alone in the world, and had need to look out for a fresh situation.

But he seemed rather slow to do this. He was not a very prepossessing person, it must be remembered, and there were not very many services for which he was fitted. Although upwards of forty years of age, he was generally rather loosely described as a young man who understood all about horses; and this qualification was usually sufficient to procure for any individual whatever some kind of employment in the neighbourhood

of Doncaster. The "Softy" seemed, however, rather to keep aloof from the people who knew and could have recommended him; and when asked why he did not seek a situation, gave evasive answers, and muttered something to the effect that he had saved a little bit of money at Mellish Park, and had no need to come upon the parish if he was out of work for a week or two.

John Mellish was so well known as a generous paymaster, that this was a matter of surprise to no one. Steeve Hargraves had no doubt had pretty pickings in that liberal household. So the "Softy" went his way unquestioned, hanging about the town in a lounging, uncomfortable manner, sitting in some public-house taproom half the day and night, drinking his meagre liquor in a sullen and unsocial style peculiar to himself, and consorting with no one.

He made his appearance at the railway station one day, and groped helplessly through all the time-tables pasted against the walls: but he could make nothing of them unaided, and was at last compelled to appeal to a good-tempered-looking official who was busy on the platform.

"I want th' Liverpool trayuns," he said, "and I can find naught about 'em here."

The official knew Mr. Hargraves, and looked at him with a stare of open wonder.

"My word, Steeve," he said laughing, "what takes you to Liverpool? I thought you'd never been further than York in your life?"

"Maybe I haven't," the "Softy" answered sulkily; "but that's no reason I shouldn't go now. I've heard of a situation at Liverpool as I think'll suit me."

"Not better than the place you had with Mr. Mellish."

"Perhaps not," muttered Mr. Hargraves, with a frown darkening over his ugly face; "but Mellish Park be no pleace for me now, and arnt been for a long time past."

The railway official laughed.

The story of Aurora's chastisement of the half-witted groom was pretty well known amongst the townspeople of Doncaster; and I am sorry to say there were very few members of that sporting community who did not admire the mistress of Mellish Park something more by reason of this little incident in her history.

Mr. Hargraves received the desired information about the railway route between Doncaster and Liverpool, and then left the station.

A shabby-looking little man, who had also been making some inquiries of the same official who had talked to the "Softy," and had consequently heard the above brief dialogue, followed Stephen Hargraves from the station into the town. Indeed, had it not been that the "Softy" was unusually slow of perception, he might have discovered that upon this particular day the same shabby-looking little man generally happened to be hanging about any and every place to which he, Mr. Hargraves, betook himself. But the cast-off retainer of Mellish Park did not trouble himself with any such misgivings. His narrow intellect, never wide enough to take in many subjects at a time, was fully absorbed by other considerations; and he loitered about with a gloomy and preoccupied expression in his face, that by no means enhanced his personal attractions.

It is not to be supposed that Mr. Joseph Grimstone let the grass grow under his feet after his interview with John Mellish and Talbot Bulstrode. He had heard enough to make his course pretty

clear to him, and he went to work quietly and sagaciously to win the reward offered to him.

There was not a tailor's shop in Doncaster or its vicinity into which the detective did not make his way. There was not a garment *confectionnée* by any of the civil purveyors upon whom he intruded that Mr. Grimstone did not examine; not a drawer of odds and ends which he did not ransack, in his search for buttons by "Crosby, maker, Birmingham." But for a long time he made his inquisition in vain. Before the day succeeding that of Talbot's arrival at Mellish Park was over, the detective had visited every tailor or clothier in the neighbourhood of the racing metropolis of the north, but no traces of "Crosby, maker, Birmingham," had he been able to find. Brass waistcoat-buttons are not particularly affected by the leaders of the fashion in the present day, and Mr. Grimstone found almost every variety of fastening upon the waistcoats he examined, except that one special style of button, a specimen of which, out of shape and blood-stained, he carried deep in his trousers-pocket.

He was returning to the inn at which he had taken up his abode, and where he was supposed to

be a traveller in the Glenfield starch and sugar-plum line, tired and worn out with a day's useless work, when he was attracted by the appearance of some ready-made garments gracefully festooned about the door of a Doncaster pawnbroker, who exhibited silver teaspoons, oil-paintings, boots and shoes, dropsical watches, doubtful rings, and remnants of silk and satin, in his artistically-arranged window.

Mr. Grimstone stopped short before the money-lender's portal.

"I won't be beaten," he muttered between his teeth. "If this man has got any weskits, I'll have a look at 'em."

He lounged into the shop in a leisurely manner, and asked the proprietor of the establishment if he had anything cheap in the way of fancy waistcoats.

Of course the proprietor had everything desirable in that way, and from a kind of grove or arbour of all manner of dry goods at the back of the shop, he brought out half a dozen brown-paper parcels, the contents of which he exhibited to Mr. Joseph Grimstone.

The detective looked at a great many waistcoats, but with no satisfactory result.

"You haven't got anything with brass buttons, I suppose?" he inquired at last.

The proprietor shook his head reflectively.

"Brass buttons aint much worn now-a-days," he said; "but I'll lay I've got the very thing you want, now I come to think of it. I got 'em an uncommon bargain from a traveller for a Birmingham house, who was here at the September meeting three years ago, and lost a hatful of money upon Underhand, and left a lot of things with me, in order to make up what he wanted."

Mr. Grimstone pricked up his ears at the sound of "Birmingham." The pawnbroker retired once more to the mysterious caverns at the back of his shop, and after a considerable search succeeded in finding what he wanted. He brought another brown-paper parcel to the counter, turned the flaming gas a little higher, and exhibited a heap of very gaudy and vulgar-looking waistcoats, evidently of that species of manufacture which is generally called slop-work.

"These are the goods," he said; "and very tasty and lively things they are, too. I had a dozen of 'em; and I've only got these five left."

Mr. Grimstone had taken up a waistcoat of a

flaming check pattern, and was examining it by the light of the gas.

Yes; the purpose of his day's work was accomplished at last. The back of the brass buttons bore the name of Crosby, Birmingham.

"You've only got five left out of the dozen," said the detective; "then you've sold seven?"

"I have."

"Can you remember who you sold 'em to?"

The pawnbroker scratched his head thoughtfully.

"I think I must have sold 'em all to the men at the works," he said. "They take their wages once a fortnight; and there's some of 'em drop in here every other Saturday night to buy something or other, or to take something out of pledge. I know I sold four or five that way."

"But can you remember selling one of them to anybody else?" asked the detective. "I'm not asking out of curiosity; and I don't mind standing something handsome by-and-by, if you can give me the information I want. Think it over, now, and take your time. You couldn't have sold 'em all seven to the men from the works."

"No; I didn't," answered the pawnbroker after a pause. "I remember now, I sold one of them —a fancy sprig on a purple ground—to Josephs the baker, in the next street; and I sold another —a yellow stripe on a brown ground—to the head-gardener at Mellish Park."

Mr. Joseph Grimstone's face flushed hot and red. His day's work had not been wasted. He was bringing the buttons by Crosby of Birmingham very near to where he wanted to bring them.

"You can tell me the gardener's name I suppose?" he said to the pawnbroker.

"Yes; his name's Dawson. He belongs to Doncaster, and he and I were boys together. I should not have remembered selling him the waistcoat, perhaps, for it's nigh upon a year and a half ago; only he stopped and had a chat with me and my missis the night he bought it."

Mr. Grimstone did not linger much longer in the shop. His interest in the waistcoats was evidently departed. He bought a couple of second-hand silk handkerchiefs out of civility, no doubt, and then bade the pawnbroker good-night.

It was nearly nine o'clock; but the detective only stopped at his inn long enough to eat about

a pound and a quarter of beefsteak, and drink a pint of ale, after which brief refreshment he started for Mellish Park on foot. It was the principle of his life to avoid observation, and he preferred the fatigue of a long and lonely walk to the risks contingent upon hiring a vehicle to convey him to his destination.

Talbot and John had been waiting hopefully all the day for the detective's coming, and welcomed him very heartily when he appeared, between ten and eleven. He was shown into John's own room this evening; for the two gentlemen were sitting there smoking and talking after Aurora and Lucy had gone to bed. Mrs. Mellish had good need of rest, and could sleep peacefully now; for the dark shadow between her and her husband had gone for ever, and she could not fear any peril, any sorrow, now that she knew herself to be secure of his love. John looked up eagerly as Mr. Grimstone followed the servant into the room; but a warning look from Talbot Bulstrode checked his impetuosity, and he waited till the door was shut before he spoke.

"Now, then, Grimstone," he said; "what news?"

"Well, sir, I've had a hard day's work," the

detective answered gravely, "and perhaps neither of you gentlemen—not being professional—would think much of what I've done; but for all that, I believe I'm bringin' it home, sir; I believe I'm bringin' it home."

"Thank God for that!" murmured Talbot Bulstrode, reverently.

He had thrown away his cigar, and was standing by the fireplace, with his arm resting upon the angle of the mantel-piece.

"You've got a gardener by the name of Dawson in your service, Mr. Mellish?" said the detective.

"I have," answered John: "but, Lord have mercy upon us! you don't mean to say you think it's him? Dawson's as good a fellow as ever breathed."

"I don't say I think it's any one as yet, sir," Mr. Grimstone answered sententiously; "but when a man as had two thousand pound upon him in bank-notes is found in a wood shot through the heart, and the notes missin'—the wood bein' free to anybody as chose to walk in it—it's a pretty open case for suspicion. I should like to see this man Dawson, if it's convenient."

"To-night?" asked John.

"Yes: the sooner the better. The less delay there is in this sort of business, the more satisfactory for all parties, with the exception of the party that's wanted," added the detective.

"I'll send for Dawson, then," answered Mr. Mellish; "but I expect he'll have gone to bed by this time."

"Then he can but get up again, if he has, sir," Mr. Grimstone said politely. "I've set my heart upon seeing him to-night, if it's all the same to you."

It is not to be supposed that John Mellish was likely to object to any arrangement which might hasten, if by but a moment's time, the hour of the discovery for which he so ardently prayed. He went straight off to the servants' hall to make inquiries for the gardener, and left Talbot Bulstrode and the detective together.

"There aint nothing turned up here, I suppose, sir," said Joseph Grimstone, addressing Mr. Bulstrode, "as will be of any help to us?"

"Yes," Talbot answered. "We have got the numbers of the notes which Mrs. Mellish gave the murdered man. I telegraphed to Mr. Floyd's

country house, and he arrived here himself only an hour ago, bringing the list of the notes with him."

"And an uncommon plucky thing of the old gentleman to do, beggin' your pardon, sir," exclaimed the detective with enthusiasm.

Five minutes afterwards, Mr. Mellish re-entered the room, bringing the gardener with him. The man had been into Doncaster to see his friends, and only returned about half an hour before; so the master of the house had caught him in the act of making havoc with a formidable cold joint, and a great jar of pickled cabbage, in the servants' hall.

"Now, you're not to be frightened, Dawson," said the young squire, with friendly indiscretion; "of course nobody for a moment suspects you, any more than they suspect me; but this gentleman here wants to see you, and of course you know there's no reason that he shouldn't see you if he wishes it, though what he wants with you—"

Mr. Mellish stopped abruptly, arrested by a frown from Talbot Bulstrode; and the gardener, who was innocent of the faintest comprehension of his master's meaning, pulled his hair respectfully, and shuffled nervously upon the slippery Indian matting.

"I only want to ask you a question or two to decide a wager between these two gentlemen and me, Mr. Dawson," said the detective with reassuring familiarity. "You bought a second-hand waistcoat of Gogram, in the market-place, didn't you, about a year and a half ago?"

"Ay, sure, sir. I bought a weskit at Gogram's," answered the gardener; "but it weren't second-hand; it were bran new."

"A yellow stripe upon a brown ground?"

The man nodded, with his mouth wide open, in the extremity of his surprise at this London stranger's familiarity with the details of his toilet.

"I dunno how you come to know about that weskit, sir," he said, with a grin; "it were wore out full six months ago; for I took to wearin' of it in t' garden, and garden-work soon spiles anything in the way of clothes; but him as I give it to was glad enough to have it, though it was awful shabby."

"Him as you give it to?" repeated Mr. Grimstone, not pausing to amend the sentence, in his eagerness. "You gave it away, then?"

"Yees, I gave it to th' 'Softy;' and wasn't th' poor fond chap glad to get it, that's all!"

"The 'Softy'!" exclaimed Mr. Grimstone. "Who's the 'Softy'?"

"The man we spoke of last night," answered Talbot Bulstrode; "the man whom Mrs. Mellish found in this room upon the morning before the murder,—the man called Stephen Hargraves."

"Ay, ay, to be sure; I thought as much," murmured the detective. "That will do, Mr. Dawson," he added, addressing the gardener, who had shuffled a good deal nearer to the doorway in his uneasy state of mind. "Stay, though; I may as well ask you one more question. Were any of the buttons missing off that waistcoat when you gave it away?"

"Not one on 'em," answered the gardener, decisively. "My missus is too particular for that. She's a reg'lar toidy one, she is; allers mendin' and patchin'; and if one of t' buttons got loose she was sure to sew it on toight again, before it was lost."

"Thank you, Mr. Dawson," returned the detective, with the friendly condescension of a superior being. "Good-night."

The gardener shuffled off, very glad to be released from the awful presence of his superiors,

and to go back to the cold meat and pickles in the servants' hall.

"I think I'm bringing the business into a nutshell, sir," said Mr. Grimstone, when the door had closed upon the gardener. "But the less said, the better, just yet awhile. I'll take the list of the numbers of the notes, please, sir; and I believe I shall come upon you for that two hundred pound, Mr. Mellish, before either of us is many weeks older."

So, with the list made by cautious Archibald Floyd, bestowed safely in his waistcoat-pocket, Mr. Joseph Grimstone walked back to Doncaster through the still summer's night, intent upon the business he had undertaken.

"It looked uncommon black against the lady about a week ago," he thought, as he walked meditatively across the dewy grass in Mellish Park; "and I fancy the information they got at the Yard would have put a fool upon the wrong scent, and kept him on it till the right one got worn out. But it's clearing up, it's clearing up beautiful; and I think it'll turn out one of the neatest cases I ever had the handling of."

CHAPTER XIII.

OFF THE SCENT.

It is scarcely necessary to say, that, with the button by Crosby in his pocket, and with the information acquired from Dawson the gardener, stowed away carefully in his mind, Mr. Joseph Grimstone looked with an eye of particular interest upon Steeve Hargraves the "Softy."

The detective had not come to Doncaster alone. He had brought with him a humble ally and follower, in the shape of the little shabby-looking man who had encountered the "Softy" at the railway station, having received orders to keep a close watch upon Mr. Stephen Hargraves. It was of course a very easy matter to identify the "Softy" in the town of Doncaster, where he had been pretty generally known since his childhood.

Mr. Grimstone had called upon a medical practitioner, and had submitted the button to him

for inspection. The stains upon it were indeed that which the detective had supposed—blood; and the surgeon detected a minute morsel of cartilage adhering to the jagged hasp of the button; but the same surgeon declared that this missile could not have been the one used by the murderer of James Conyers. It had not been through the dead man's body; it had inflicted only a surface wound.

The business which now lay before Mr. Grimstone was the tracing of one or other of the bank-notes; and for this purpose he and his ally set to work upon the track of the "Softy," with a view of discovering all the places which it was his habit to visit. The haunts affected by Mr. Hargraves turned out to be some half-dozen very obscure public-houses; and to each of these Joseph Grimstone went in person.

But he could discover nothing. All his inquiries only elicited the fact that Stephen Hargraves had not been observed to change, or to attempt to change, any bank-note whatever. He had paid for all he had had, and spent more than it was usual for him to spend, drinking a good deal harder than had been his habit hereto-

fore; but he had paid in silver, except on one occasion, when he had changed a sovereign. The detective called at the bank; but no person answering the description of Stephen Hargraves had been observed there. The detective endeavoured to discover any friends or companions of the "Softy;" but here again he failed. The half-witted hanger-on of the Mellish stables had never made any friends, being entirely deficient in all social qualities.

There was something almost miraculous in the manner in which Mr. Joseph Grimstone contrived to make himself master of any information which he wished to acquire; and before noon on the day after his interview with Mr. Dawson the gardener, he had managed to eliminate all the facts set down above, and had also succeeded in ingratiating himself into the confidence of the dirty old proprietress of that humble lodging in which the "Softy" had taken up his abode.

It is scarcely necessary to this story to tell how the detective went to work; but while Stephen Hargraves sat soddening his stupid brain with medicated beer in a low tap-room not far off, and while Mr. Grimstone's ally kept close watch, holding himself in readinesst to give warning

of any movement on the part of the suspected individual. Mr. Grimstone himself went so cleverly to work in his manipulation of the "Softy's" landlady, that in less than a quarter of an hour he had taken full possession of that weak point in the intellectual citadel which is commonly called the blind side, and was able to do what he pleased with the old woman and her wretched tenement.

His peculiar pleasure was to make a very elaborate examination of the apartment rented by the "Softy," and any other apartments, cupboards, or hiding-places to which Mr. Hargraves had access. But he found nothing to reward him for his trouble. The old woman was in the habit of receiving casual lodgers, resting for a night or so at Doncaster before tramping further on their vagabond wanderings; and the six-roomed dwelling-place was only furnished with such meagre accommodation as may be expected for fourpence and sixpence a night. There were few hiding-places,—no carpets, underneath which fat bundles of bank-notes might be hidden; no picture-frames, behind which the same species of property might be bestowed; no ponderous cornices or heavily-fringed valances shrouding the windows, and

affording dusty recesses wherein the title-deeds of half a dozen fortunes might lie and rot. There were two or three cupboards, into which Mr. Grimstone penetrated with a tallow candle; but he discovered nothing of any more importance than crockery-ware, lucifer-matches, fire-wood, potatoes, bare ropes, on which an onion lingered here and there and sprouted dismally in its dark loneliness, empty ginger-beer bottles, oyster-shells, old boots and shoes, disabled mouse-traps, black beetles, and humid fungi rising ghost-like from the damp and darkness.

Mr. Grimstone emerged dirty and discomforted, from one of these dark recesses, after a profitless search, which had occupied a couple of weary hours.

"Some other chap'll go in and cut the ground under my feet, if I waste my time this way," thought the detective. "I'm blest if I don't think I've been a fool for my pains. The man carries the money about him,—that's as clear as mud; and if I were to search Doncaster till my hair got gray, I shouldn't find what I want."

Mr. Grimstone shut the door of the last cupboard which he had examined, with an impatient slam, and then turned towards the window.

There was no sign of his scout in the little alley before the house, and he had time therefore for further business.

He had examined everything in the "Softy's" apartment, and he had paid particular attention to the state of Mr. Hargraves' wardrobe, which consisted of a pile of garments, every one of which bore in its cut and fashion the stamp of a different individuality, and thereby proclaimed itself as having belonged to another master. There was a Newmarket coat of John Mellish's, and a pair of hunting-breeches, which could only have built up the great Poole himself, split across the knees, but otherwise little the worse for wear. There was a linen jacket, and an old livery waistcoat that had belonged to one of the servants at the Park; odd tops of every shade known in the hunting-field, from the spotless white, or the delicate champagne-cleaned cream colour of the dandy, to the favourite vinegar hue of the hard-riding country squire; a groom's hat with a tarnished band and a battered crown; hob-nailed boots, which may have belonged to Mr. Dawson; corduroy breeches that could only have fitted a dropsical lodge-keeper, long deceased; and there was one

garment which bore upon it the ghastly impress of a dreadful deed that had but lately been done. This was the velveteen shooting-coat worn by James Conyers, the trainer, which, pierced with the murderous bullet, and stiffened by the soaking torrent of blood, had been appropriated by Mr. Stephen Hargraves in the confusion of the catastrophe. All these things, with sundry rubbish in the way of odd spurs and whip-handles, scraps of broken harness, ends of rope, and such other scrapings as only a miser loves to accumulate, were packed in a lumbering trunk covered with mangy fur, and secured by about a dozen yards of knotted and jagged rope, tied about it in such a manner as the "Softy" had considered sufficient to defy the most artful thief in Christendom.

Mr. Grimstone had made very short work of all the elaborate defences in the way of knots and entanglements, and had ransacked the box from one end to the other; nay, had even closely examined the fur covering of the trunk, and had tested each separate brass-headed nail to ascertain if any of them had been removed or altered. He may have thought it just possible that two thousand pounds' worth of Bank of England paper

had been nailed down under the mangy fur. He gave a weary sigh as he concluded his inspection, replaced the garments one by one in the trunk, reknotted and secured the jagged cord, and with a weary sigh turned his back upon the "Softy's" chamber.

"It's no good," he thought. "The yellow-striped waistcoat isn't among his clothes, and the money isn't hidden away anywhere. Can he be deep enough to have destroyed that waistcoat, I wonder? He'd got a red woollen one on this morning; perhaps he's got the yellow-striped one under it."

Mr. Grimstone brushed the dust and cobwebs off his clothes, washed his hands in a greasy wooden bowl of scalding water, which the old woman brought him, and then sat down before the fire, picking his teeth thoughtfully, and with his eyebrows set in a reflective frown over his small gray eyes.

"I don't like to be beat," he thought; "I don't like to be beat." He doubted if any magistrate would grant him a warrant against the "Softy" upon the strength of the evidence in his possession—the blood-stained button by Crosby of Birmingham; and without a warrant he could not

search for the notes upon the person of the man he suspected. He had sounded all the out-door servants at Mellish Park, but had been able to discover nothing that threw any light upon the movements of Stephen Hargraves on the night of the murder. No one remembered having seen him; no one had been on the southern side of the wood that night. One of the lads had passed the north lodge on his way from the high-road to the stables, about the time at which Aurora had heard the shot fired in the wood, and had seen a light burning in the lower window; but this, of course, proved nothing either one way or the other.

"If we could find the money *upon him*," thought Mr. Grimstone; "it would be pretty strong proof of the robbery; and if we find the waistcoat off which that button came, in his possession, it wouldn't be bad evidence of the murder, putting the two things together; but we shall have to keep a precious sharp watch upon my friend, while we hunt up what we want, or I'm blest if he won't give us the slip, and be off to Liverpool and out of the country before we know where we are."

Now the truth of the matter is, that Mr. Joseph

Grimstone was not, perhaps, acting quite so conscientiously in this business as he might have done, had the love of justice in the abstract, and without any relation to sublunary reward, been the ruling principle of his life. He might have had any help he pleased, from the Doncaster constabulary, had he chosen to confide in the members of that force; but, as a very knowing individual who owns a three-year old, which he has reason to believe "a flyer," is apt to keep the capabilities of his horse a secret from his friends and the sporting public, while he puts a "pot" of money upon the animal at enormous odds, so Mr. Grimstone desired to keep his information to himself, until it should have brought him its golden fruit in the shape of a small reward from Government, and a large one from John Mellish.

The detective had reason to know that the Dogberries of Doncaster, misled by a duplicate of that very letter which had first aroused the attention of Scotland Yard, were on the wrong scent, as he had been at first; and he was very well content to leave them where they were.

"No," he thought, "it's a critical game; but I'll play it single-handed, or, at least, with no one

better than Tom Chivers to help me through with it; and a ten-pound note will satisfy him, if we win the day."

Pondering thus, Mr. Grimstone departed, after having recompensed the landlady for her civility by a donation which the old woman considered princely.

He had entirely deluded her as to the object of his search by telling her that he was a lawyer's clerk, commissioned by his employer to hunt for a codicil which had been hidden somewhere in that house by an old man who had lived in it in the year 1783; and he had contrived, in the course of conversation, to draw from the old woman, who was of a garrulous turn, all that she had to tell about the "Softy."

It was not much, certainly. Mr. Hargraves had never changed a bank-note with her knowledge. He had paid for his bit of victuals as he had it, but had not spent a shilling a day. As to bank-notes, it wasn't at all likely that he had any of them; for he was always complaining that he was very poor, and that his little bit of savings, scraped together out of his wages, wouldn't last him long.

"This Hargraves is a precious deep one for all

they call him soft," thought Mr. Grimstone, as he left the lodging-house, and walked slowly towards the sporting public-house at which he had left the "Softy" under the watchful eye of Mr. Tom Chivers. "I've often heard say that these half-witted chaps have more cunning in their little fingers than a better man has in the whole of his composition. Another man would have never been able to stand against the temptation of changing one of those notes; or would have gone about wearing that identical waistcoat; or would have made a bolt of it the day after the murder; or tried on something or other that would have blown the gaff upon him; but not your 'Softy!' He hides the notes and he hides the waistcoat, and then he laughs in his sleeve at those that want him, and sits drinking his beer as comfortably as you please."

Pondering thus, the detective made his way to the public-house in which he had left Mr. Stephen Hargraves. He ordered a glass of brandy-and-water at the bar, and walked into the taproom, expecting to see the "Softy" still brooding sullenly over his drink, still guarded by the apparently indifferent eye of Mr. Chivers. But it was not so. The taproom was empty; and upon making

cautious inquiries, Mr. Grimstone discovered that the "Softy" and his watcher had been gone for upwards of an hour.

Mr. Chivers had been forbidden to let his charge out of sight under any circumstances whatever, except indeed if the "Softy" had turned homewards while Mr. Grimstone was employed in ransacking his domicile, in which event Tom was to have slipped on a few paces before him, and given warning to his chief. Wherever Stephen Hargraves went, Mr. Thomas Chivers was to follow him; but he was, above all, to act in such a manner as would effectually prevent any suspicion arising in the "Softy's" mind as to the fact that he was followed.

It will be seen, therefore, that poor Chivers had no very easy task to perform, and it has been seen that he had heretofore contrived to perform it pretty skilfully. If Stephen Hargraves sat boozing in a taproom half the day, Mr. Chivers was also to booze or to make a pretence of boozing, for the same length of time. If the "Softy" showed any disposition to be social, and gave his companion any opportunity of getting friendly with him, the detective's underling was to employ his utmost skill

and discretion in availing himself of that golden chance. It is a wondrous provision of Providence that the treachery which would be hateful and horrible in any other man, is considered perfectly legitimate in the man who is employed to hunt out a murderer or a thief. The vile instruments which the criminal employed against his unsuspecting victim are in due time used against himself; and the wretch who laughed at the poor unsuspecting dupe who was trapped to his destruction by *his* lies, is caught in his turn by some shallow deceit, or pitifully hackneyed device, of the paid spy, who has been bribed to lure him to his doom. For the outlaw of society, the code of honour is null and void. His existence is a perpetual peril to innocent women and honourable men; and the detective who beguiles him to his end does such a service to society as must doubtless counterbalance the treachery of the means by which it is done. The days of Jonathan Wild and his compeers are over, and the thief-taker no longer begins life as a thief. The detective officer is as honest as he is intrepid and astute, and it is not his own fault if the dirty nature of all crime gives him now and then dirty work to do.

But Mr. Stephen Hargraves did not give the opportunity for which Tom Chivers had been bidden to lie in wait; he sat sullen, silent, stupid, unapproachable; and as Tom's orders were not to force himself upon his companion, he was fain to abandon all thought of worming himself into the "Softy's" good graces. This made the task of watching him all the more difficult. It is not such a very easy matter to follow a man without seeming to follow him.

It was market-day too, and the town was crowded with noisy country people. Mr. Grimstone suddenly remembered this, and the recollection by no means added to his peace of mind.

"Chivers never did sell me," he thought, "and surely he won't do it now. I dare say they're safe enough, for the matter of that, in some other public. I'll slip out and look after them."

Mr. Grimstone had, as I have said, already made himself acquainted with all the haunts affected by the "Softy." It did not take him long, therefore, to look in at the three or four public-houses where Steeve Hargraves was likely to be found, and to discover that he was not there.

"He's slouching about the town somewhere or

other. I dare say," thought the detective, "with my mate close upon his heels. I'll stroll towards the market-place, and see if I can find them anywhere that way."

Mr. Grimstone turned out of the by-street in which he had been walking, into a narrow alley leading to the broad open square upon which the market-place stands.

The detective went his way in a leisurely manner, with his hands in his pockets and a cigar in his mouth. He had perfect confidence in Mr. Thomas Chivers, and the crowded state of the market-place and its neighbourhood in no way weakened his sense of security.

"Chivers will stick to him through thick and thin," he thought; "he'd keep an eye upon his man if he had to look after him between Charing Cross and Whitehall when the Queen was going to open Parliament. He's not the man to be flummuxed by a crowd in a country market-place."

Serene in this sense of security, Mr. Grimstone amused himself by looking about him, with an expression of somewhat supercilious wonder, at the manners and customs of those indigenæ who,

upon market-day, make their inroad into the quiet town. He paused upon the edge of a little sunken flight of worn steps leading down to the stage-door of the theatre, and read the fragments of old bills mouldering upon the door-posts and lintel. There were glowing announcements of dramatic performances that had long ago taken place; and above the rain and mud stained relics of the past, in bold black lettering, appeared the record of a drama as terrible as any that had ever been enacted in that provincial theatre. The bill-sticker had posted the announcement of the reward offered by John Mellish for the discovery of the murderer in every available spot, and had not forgotten this position, which commanded one of the entrances to the market-place.

"It's a wonder to me," muttered Mr. Grimstone, "that that blessed bill shouldn't have opened the eyes of these Doncaster noodles. But I dare say they think it's a blind, a planned thing to throw 'em off the scent their clever noses are sticking to so determined. If I can get *my* man before they open their eyes, I shall have such a haul as I haven't met with lately."

Musing thus pleasantly, Mr. Grimstone turned

his back upon the theatre, and crossed over to the market. Within the building the clamour of buying and selling was at its height: noisy countrymen chaffering in their northern *patois* upon the value and merits of poultry, butter, and eggs; dealers in butchers' meat bewildering themselves in the endeavour to simultaneously satisfy the demands of half a dozen sharp and bargain-loving housekeepers; while from without there came a confused clatter of other merchants and other customers, clamouring and hustling round the stalls of greengrocers and the slimy barrows of blue-jacketed fishmongers. In the midst of all this bustle and confusion, Mr. Grimstone came suddenly upon his trusted ally, pale, terror-stricken, and—ALONE!

The detective's mind was not slow to grasp the full force of the situation.

"You've lost him!" he whispered fiercely, seizing the unfortunate Mr. Chivers by the collar, and pinning him as securely as if he had serious thoughts of making him a permanent fixture upon the stone-flags of the market-place. "You've lost him, Tom Chivers!" he continued, hoarse with agitation. "You've lost the party that I

told you was worth more to me than any other party I ever gave you the office for. You've lost me the best chance I've ever had since I've been in Scotland Yard, and yourself too; for I should have acted liberal by you," added the detective, apparently oblivious of that morning's reverie, in which he had pre-determined offering his assistant ten pounds, in satisfaction of all his claims,—"I should have acted very liberal by you, Tom. But what's the use of standing jawing here? You come along with me; you can tell me how it happened as we go."

With his powerful grasp still on the underling's collar, Mr. Grimstone walked out of the market-place, neither looking to the right nor the left, though many a pair of rustic eyes opened to their widest as he passed, attracted no doubt by the rapidity of his pace and the obvious determination of his manner. Perhaps those rustic bystanders thought that the stern-looking gentleman in the black frock-coat had arrested the shabby little man in the act of picking his pocket, and was bearing him off to deliver him straight into the hands of justice.

Mr. Grimstone released his grasp when he

and his companion had got clear of the market-place.

"Now," he said, breathless, but not slackening his pace,—"now I suppose you can tell me how you came to make such an"—inadmissable adjective—"fool of yourself? Never you mind where I'm goin'. I'm goin' to the railway station. Never you mind why I'm goin' there. You'd guess why, if you weren't a fool. Now tell me all about it, can't you?"

"It aint much to tell," the humble follower gasped, his respiratory functions sadly tried by the pace at which his superior went over the ground. "It aint much. I followed your instructions faithful. I tried, artful and quiet-like, to make acquaintance with him; but that warn't a bit o' good. He was as surly as a bull-terrier, so I didn't force him to it; but kept an eye upon him, and let out before him as it was racin' business as had brought me to Doncaster, and as I was here to look after a horse, what was in trainin' a few miles off, for a gent in London; and when he left the public, I went after him, but not conspicuous. But I think from that minute he was fly, for he didn't go three steps without lookin'

back, and he led me such a chase as made my legs tremble under me, which they trembles at this moment; and then he gets me into the market-place, and he dodges here, and he dodges there, and wherever the crowd's thickest he dodges most, till he gets me at last in among a ring of market-people round a couple o' coves a-millin' with each other, and there I loses him. And I've been in and out the market, and here and there, until I'm fit to drop, but it aint no good; and you've no call to lay the blame on me, for mortal man couldn't have done more."

Mr. Chivers wiped the perspiration from his face in testimony of his exertions. Dirty little streams were rolling down his forehead and trickling upon his poor faded cheeks. He mopped up these evidences of his fatigue with a red cotton handkerchief, and gave a deprecatory sigh.

"If there's anybody to lay blame on, it aint me," he said mildly. "I said all along you ought to have had help. A man as is on his own ground, and knows his own ground, is more than a match for one cove, however hard he may work."

The detective turned fiercely upon his meek dependent.

"Who's blaming you?" he cried impatiently. "I wouldn't cry out before I was hurt, if I were you."

They had reached the railway station by this time.

"How long is it since you missed him?" asked Mr. Grimstone of the penitent Chivers.

"Three-quarters of a hour, or it may be a hour," Tom added doubtfully.

"I dare say it *is* an hour," muttered the detective.

He walked straight to one of the chief officials, and asked what trains had left within the last hour.

"Two—both market trains: one eastward, Selby way; the other for Penistone, and the intervening stations."

The detective looked at the time-table, running his thumb-nail along the names of the stations.

"That train will reach Penistone in time to catch the Liverpool train, won't it?" he asked.

"Just about."

"What time did it go?"

"The Penistone train?"

"Yes."

"About half an hour ago; at 2.30."

The clocks had struck three as Mr. Grimstone made his way to the station.

"Half an hour ago," muttered the detective. "He'd have had ample time to catch the train after giving Chivers the slip."

He questioned the guards and porters as to whether any of them had seen a man answering to the description of the "Softy:" a white-faced, hump-backed fellow, in corduroys and a fustian jacket; and even penetrated into the ticket-clerk's office to ask the same question.

No; none of them had seen Mr. Stephen Hargraves. Two or three of them recognized him by the detective's description, and asked if it was one of the stable-men from Mellish Park that the gentleman was inquiring after. Mr. Grimstone rather evaded any direct answer to this question. Secrecy was, as we know, the principle upon which he conducted his affairs.

"He may have contrived to give 'em all the slip," he said confidentially to his faithful but dispirited ally. "He may have got off without any of 'em seeing him. He's got the money about him, I'm all but certain of that; and his game is to get off to Liverpool. His inquiries after the

trains yesterday proves that. Now I might telegraph, and have him stopped at Liverpool—supposing him to have given us all the slip, and gone off there—if I like to let others into the game; but I don't. I'll play to win or lose; but I'll play single-handed. He may try another dodge, and get off Hull way by the canal-boats that the market-people use, and then slip across to Hamburg, or something of that sort; but that aint likely,—these fellows always go one way. It seems as if the minute a man has taken another man's life, or forged his name, or embezzled his money, his ideas get fixed in one groove, and never can soar higher than Liverpool and the American packet."

Mr. Chivers listened respectfully to his patron's communications. He was very well pleased to see the serenity of his employer's mind gradually returning.

"Now, I'll tell you what, Tom," said Mr. Grimstone. "If this chap has given us the slip, why he's given us the slip, and he's got a start of us, which we sha'n't be able to pick up till half-past ten o'clock to-night, when there's a train that'll take us to Liverpool. If he *hasn't* given us the

slip, there's only one way he can leave Doncaster, and that's by this station; so you stay here patient and quiet till you see me, or hear from me. If he is in Doncaster, I'm jiggered if I don't find him."

With which powerful asseveration Mr. Grimstone walked away, leaving his scout to keep watch for the possible coming of the "Softy."

CHAPTER XIV.

TALBOT BULSTRODE MAKES ATONEMENT FOR THE PAST.

John Mellish and Talbot Balstrode walked to and fro upon the lawn before the drawing-room windows on that afternoon on which the detective and his underling lost sight of Stephen Hargraves. It was a dreary time, this period of watching and waiting, of uncertainty and apprehension; and poor John Mellish chafed bitterly under the burden which he had to bear.

Now that his friend's common sense had come to his relief, and that a few plain out-spoken sentences had dispersed the terrible cloud of mystery; now that he himself was fully assured of his wife's innocence, he had no patience with the stupid country people who held themselves aloof from the woman he loved. He wanted to go out and do battle for his slandered wife; to hurl back every base suspicion into the faces that had

scowled upon his idolized Aurora. How could they dare, these foul-minded slanderers, to harbour one base thought against the purest, the most perfect of women? Mr. Mellish of course quite forgot that he, the rightful defender of all this perfection, had suffered his mind to be for a time obscured beneath the black shadow of that vile suspicion.

He hated the old friends of his youth for their base avoidance of him; the servants of his household for a half-doubtful, half-solemn expression of face, which he knew had relation to that growing suspicion, that horrible suspicion, which seemed to grow stronger with every hour. He broke out into a storm of rage with the gray-haired butler, who had carried him pick-a-back in his infancy, because the faithful retainer tried to hold back certain newspapers which contained dark allusions to the Mellish mystery.

"Who told you I didn't want the 'Manchester Guardian,' Jarvis?" he cried fiercely; "who gave you the right to dictate what I'm to read or what I'm to leave unread? I do want to-day's 'Guardian;' to-day's, and yesterday's, and to-morrow's, and every other newspaper that comes

into this house. I won't have them overhauled by you, or any one, to see whether they're pleasant reading or not, before they're brought to me. Do you think *I'm* afraid of anything these penny-a-liner fellows can write?" roared the young squire, striking his open hand upon the table at which he sat. "Let them write their best or their worst of me. But let them write one word that can be twisted into an insinuation upon the purest and truest woman in all Christendom, and, by the Lord above me, I'll give them such a thrashing—penny-a-liners, printers, publishers, and every man-Jack of them—as shall make them remember the business to the last hour of their lives!"

Mr. Mellish said all this in despite of the restraining presence of Talbot Bulstrode. Indeed, the young member for Penruthy had by no means a pleasant time of it during those few days of anxiety and suspense. A keeper set to watch over a hearty young jungle-tiger, and bidden to prevent the noble animal from committing any imprudence, might have found his work little harder than that which Mr. Bulstrode did, patiently and uncomplainingly, for pure friendship's sake.

John Mellish roamed about in the custody of

this friendly keeper, with his short auburn hair tumbled into a feverish-looking mass, like a field of ripening corn that had been beaten by a summer hurricane, his cheeks sunken and haggard, and a bristling yellow stubble upon his chin. I dare say he had made a vow neither to shave nor be shaven until the murderer of James Conyers should be found. He clung desperately to Talbot Bulstrode, but he clung with still wilder desperation to the detective, the professional criminal hunter, who had in a manner tacitly pledged himself to the discovery of the real homicide.

All through the fitful August day, now hot and still, now overclouded and showery, the master of Mellish Park went hither and thither,—now sitting in his study; now roaming out on the lawn; now pacing up and down the drawing-room, displacing, disarranging, and overturning the pretty furniture; now wandering up and down the staircase, lolling on the landing-places, and patrolling the corridor outside the rooms in which Lucy and Aurora sat together making a show of employing themselves, but only waiting, waiting, waiting, for the hoped-for end.

Poor John scarcely cared to meet that dearly-loved wife; for the great earnest eyes that looked

in his face always asked the same question so plainly,—always appealed so piteously for the answer that could not be given.

It was a weary and a bitter time. I wonder, as I write of it, when I think of a quiet Somersetshire household in which a dreadful deed was done, the secret of which has never yet been brought to light, and perhaps never will be revealed until the Day of Judgment, what must have been suffered by each member of *that* family? What slow agonies, what ever-increasing tortures, while that cruel mystery was the "sensation" topic of conversation in a thousand happy home-circles, in a thousand tavern-parlours and pleasant club-rooms!—a common and ever-interesting topic, by means of which travellers in first-class railway carriages might break down the ceremonial icebergs which surround each travelling Englishman, and grow friendly and confidential; a safe topic upon which even tacit enemies might talk pleasantly without fear of wrecking themselves upon hidden rocks of personal insinuation. God help that household, or any such household, through the weary time of waiting which it may please Him to appoint, until that day in which it shall

be His good pleasure to reveal the truth! God help all patient creatures labouring under the burden of an unjust suspicion, and support them unto the end!

John Mellish chafed and fretted himself ceaselessly all through that August day at the non-appearance of the detective. Why didn't he come? He had promised to bring or send them news of his proceedings. Talbot in vain assured his friend that Mr. Grimstone was no doubt hard at work; that such a discovery as he had to make was not to be made in a day; and that Mr. Mellish had nothing to do but to make himself as comfortable as he could, and wait quietly for the event he desired so eagerly.

"I should not say this to you, John," Mr. Bulstrode said by-and-by, "if I did not believe—as I know this man Grimstone believes—that we are upon the right track, and are pretty sure to bring the crime home to the wretch who committed it. You can do nothing but be patient, and wait the result of Grimstone's labours."

"Yes," cried John Mellish; "and in the mean time all these people are to say cruel things of my darling, and keep aloof from her, and—No, I

can't bear it, Talbot; I can't bear it. I'll turn my back upon this confounded place; I'll sell it; I'll burn it down; I'll—I'll do anything to get away, and take my precious one from the wretches who have slandered her!"

"That you shall *not* do, John Mellish," exclaimed Talbot Bulstrode, "until the murderer of James Conyers has been discovered. Go away, then, as soon as you like; for the associations of this place cannot be otherwise than disagreeable to you—for a time, at least. But until the truth is out, you must remain here. If there is any foul suspicion against Aurora, her presence here will best give the lie to that suspicion. It was her hurried journey to London which first set people talking of her, I dare say," added Mr. Bulstrode, who was of course entirely ignorant of the fact that an anonymous letter from Mrs. Powell had originally aroused the suspicions of the Doncaster constabulary.

So through the long summer's day Talbot reasoned with and comforted his friend, never growing weary of his task, never for one moment losing sight of the interests of Aurora Mellish and her husband.

Perhaps this was a self-imposed penalty for the wrong which he had done the banker's daughter long ago in the dim star-lit chamber at Felden. If it was so, he did penance very cheerfully.

"Heaven knows how gladly I would do her a service," he thought; "her life has been a troubled one, in spite of her father's thousands. Thank Heaven, my poor little Lucy has never been forced into playing the heroine of a tragedy like this; thank Heaven, my poor little darling's life flows evenly and placidly in a smooth channel!"

He could not but reflect with something of a shudder that it might have been his wife whose history was being canvassed throughout the West Riding. He could not be otherwise than pleased to remember that the name of the woman he had chosen had never gone beyond the holy circle of her own home, to be the common talk among strangers.

There are things which are utterly unendurable to some people, but which are not at all terrible in the eyes of others. John Mellish, secure in his own belief in his wife's innocence, would have been content to carry her away with him, after

razing the home of his forefathers to the ground, and defying all Yorkshire to find a flaw or speck upon her fair fame. But Talbot Bulstrode would have gone mad with the agony of the thought that common tongues had defiled the name he loved, and would, in no after-triumph of his wife's innocence, been able to forget or to recover from the torture of that unendurable agony. There are people who cannot forget, and Talbot Bulstrode was one of them. He had never forgotten his Christmas agony at Felden Woods, and the after-struggle at Bulstrode Castle; nor did he ever hope to forget it. The happiness of the present, pure and unalloyed though it was, could not annihilate the anguish of the past. *That* stood alone,—so many months, weeks, days, and hours of unutterable misery, riven away from the rest of his life, to remain for ever a stony memorial upon the smooth plains of the past.

Archibald Martin Floyd sat with his daughter and Lucy, in Mrs. Mellish's morning-room, the pleasantest chamber for many reasons, but chiefly because it was removed from the bustle of the house, and from the chance of unwelcome intrusion. All the troubles of that household had

been made light of in the presence of the old man, and no word had been dropped before him, which could give him reason to guess that his only child had been suspected of the most fearful crime that man or woman can commit. But Archibald Floyd was not easily to be deceived where his daughter's happiness was in question; he had watched that beautiful face—whose ever-varying expression was its highest charm—so long and earnestly, as to have grown familiar with its every look. No shadow upon the brightness of his daughter's beauty could possibly escape the old man's eyes, dim as they may have grown for the figures in his banking-book. It was Aurora's business, therefore, to sit by her father's side in the pleasant morning-room, to talk to him and amuse him; while John rambled hither and thither, and made himself otherwise tiresome to his patient companion, Talbot Bulstrode. Mrs. Mellish repeated to her father again and again, that there was no cause for uneasiness; they were merely anxious — naturally anxious — that the guilty man should be found and brought to justice; nothing more.

The banker accepted this explanation of his

daughter's pale face very quietly; but he was not the less anxious,—anxious he scarcely knew why, but with the shadow of a dark cloud hanging over him, that was not to be driven away.

Thus the long August day wore itself out, and the low sun—blazing a lurid red behind the trees in Mellish Wood, until it made that pool beside which the murdered man had fallen, seem a pool of blood—gave warning that one weary day of watching and suspense was nearly done.

John Mellish, far too restless to sit long at dessert, had roamed out upon the lawn: still attended by his indefatigable keeper, Talbot Bulstrode, and employed himself in pacing up and down the smooth grass amid Mr. Dawson's flower-beds, looking always towards the pathway that led to the house, and breathing suppressed anathemas against the dilatory detective.

"One day nearly gone, thank Heaven, Talbot!" he said, with an impatient sigh. "Will to-morrow bring us no nearer what we want, I wonder? What if it should go on like this for long? what if it should go on for ever, until Aurora and I go mad with this wretched anxiety and suspense? Yes, I know you think me a

fool and a coward, Talbot Bulstrode; but I can't bear it quietly, I tell you I can't. I know there are some people who can shut themselves up with their troubles, and sit down quietly and suffer without a groan; but I can't. I must cry out when I am tortured, or I should dash my brains out against the first wall I came to, and make an end of it. To think that anybody should suspect my darling! to think that they should believe her to be——"

"To think that *you* should have believed it, John!" said Mr. Bulstrode, gravely.

"Ah, there's the cruelest stab of all," cried John; "if *I*,—I who know her, and love her, and believe in her as man never yet believed in woman,—if *I* could have been bewildered and maddened by that horrible chain of cruel circumstances, every one of which pointed—Heaven help me!—at her!—if *I* could be deluded by these things until my brain reeled, and I went nearly mad with doubting my own dearest love, what may strangers think—strangers who neither know nor love her, but who are only too ready to believe anything unnaturally infamous? Talbot, I *won't* endure this any longer. I'll ride into Doncaster

and see this man Grimstone. He *must* have done some good to-day. I'll go at once."

Mr. Mellish would have walked straight off to the stables; but Talbot Bulstrode caught him by the arm.

"You may miss the man on the road, John," he said. "He came last night after dark, and may come as late to-night. There's no knowing whether he'll come by the road, or the short cut across the fields. You're as likely to miss him as not."

Mr. Mellish hesitated.

"He mayn't come at all to-night," he said; 'and I tell you I can't bear this suspense."

"Let *me* ride into Doncaster, then, John," urged Talbot; "and you stay here to receive Grimstone if he should come."

Mr. Mellish was considerably mollified by this proposition.

"Will you ride into the town, Talbot?" he said. "Upon my word, it's very kind of you to propose it. I shouldn't like to miss this man upon any account; but at the same time I don't feel inclined to wait for the chance of his coming or staying away. I'm afraid I'm a great nuisance to you, Bulstrode."

"Not a bit of it," answered Talbot, with a smile.

Perhaps he smiled involuntarily at the notion of how little John Mellish knew what a nuisance he had been through that weary day.

"I'll go with very great pleasure, John," he said, "if you'll tell them to saddle a horse for me."

"To be sure; you shall have Red Rover, my covert hack. We'll go round to the stables, and see about him at once."

The truth of the matter is, Talbot Bulstrode was very well pleased himself to hunt up the detective, rather than that John Mellish should execute that errand in person; for it would have been about as easy for the young squire to have translated a number of the 'Sporting Magazine' into Porsonian Greek, as to have kept a secret for half an hour, however earnestly entreated, or however conscientiously determined to do so.

Mr. Bulstrode had made it his particular business, therefore, during the whole of that day, to keep his friend as much as possible out of the way of every living creature, fully aware that Mr. Mellish's manner would most certainly betray

him to the least observant eyes that might chance to fall upon him.

Red Rover was saddled, and, after twenty loudly whispered injunctions from John, Talbot Bulstrode rode away in the evening sunlight. The nearest way from the stables to the high road took him past the north lodge. It had been shut up since the day of the trainer's funeral, and such furniture as it contained left to become a prey to moths and rats; for the Mellish servants were a great deal too superstitiously impressed with the story of the murder to dream of readmitting those goods and chattels which had been selected for Mr. Convers's accommodation to the garrets whence they had been taken. The door had been locked, therefore, and the key given to Dawson the gardener, who was to be once more free to use the place as a storehouse for roots and matting, superannuated cucumber-frames, and crippled garden tools.

The place looked dreary enough, though the low sun made a gorgeous illumination upon one of the latticed windows that faced the crimson west, and though the last leaves of the roses were still lying upon the long grass in the patch of garden

before the door out of which Mr. Conyers had gone to his last resting-place. One of the stable-boys had accompanied Mr. Bulstrode to the lodge in order to open the rusty iron gates, which hung loosely on their hinges, and were never locked.

Talbot rode at a brisk pace into Doncaster, never drawing rein until he reached the little inn at which the detective had taken up his quarters. Mr. Grimstone had been snatching a hasty refreshment, after a weary and useless perambulation about the town, and came out with his mouth full, to speak to Mr. Bulstrode. But he took very good care not to confess that since three o'clock that day neither he nor his ally had seen or heard of Mr. Stephen Hargraves, or that he was actually no nearer the discovery of the murderer than he had been at eleven o'clock upon the previous night, when he had discovered the original proprietor of the fancy waistcoat, with buttons by Crosby, Birmingham, in the person of Dawson the gardener.

"I'm not losing any time, sir," he said, in answer to Talbot's inquiries; "my sort of work's quiet work, and don't make no show till it's done. I've reason to think the man we want is in Doncaster; so I stick in Doncaster, and mean to, till

I lay my hand upon him, unless I should get information as would point further off. Tell Mr. Mellish I'm doing my duty, sir, and doing it conscientious; and that I shall neither eat nor drink nor sleep more than just as much as'll keep human nature together, until I've done what I've set my mind on doing."

"But you've discovered nothing fresh, then?" said Talbot; "you've nothing new to tell me?"

"Whatever I've discovered is neither here nor there yet awhile, sir," answered the detective vaguely. "You keep your heart up, and tell Mr. Mellish to keep his heart up, and trust in me."

Talbot Bulstrode was obliged to be content with this rather doubtful comfort. It was not much, certainly; but he determined to make the best of it to John Mellish.

He rode out of Doncaster, past the Reindeer and the white-fronted houses of the wealthier citizens of that prosperous borough, and away upon the smooth high road. The faint shimmer of the pale early moonlight lit up the tree-tops right and left of him, as he left the suburb behind, and made the road ghostly beneath his horse's feet. He was in no very hopeful humour, after his

interview with Mr. Grimstone, and he knew that hungry-eyed members of the Doncaster constabulary were keeping stealthy watch upon every creature in the Mellish household, and that the slanderous tongues of a greedy public were swelling into a loud and ominous murmur against the wife John loved. Every hour, every moment, was of vital importance. A hundred perils menaced them on every side. What might they not have to dread from eager busy-bodies anxious to distinguish themselves, and proud of being the first to circulate a foul scandal against the lovely daughter of one of the richest men upon the Stock Exchange? Hayward the coroner, and Lofthouse the rector, both knew the secret of Aurora's life; and it would be little wonder if, looking at the trainer's death by the light of that knowledge, they believed her guilty of some share in the ghastly business which had terminated the trainer's service at Mellish Park.

What if, by some horrible fatality, the guilty man should escape, and the truth never be revealed! For ever and for ever, until her blighted name should be written upon a tombstone, Aurora Mellish must rest under the shadow of this sus-

picion. Could there be any doubt that the sensitive and highly-strung nature would give way under the unendurable burden; that the proud heart would break beneath the undeserved disgrace? What misery for her! and not for her alone, but for every one who loved her, or had any share in her history! Heaven pardon the selfishness that prompted the thought, if Talbot Bulstrode remembered that he would have some part in that bitter disgrace; that his name was allied, if only remotely, with that of his wife's cousin; and that the shame which would make the name of Mellish a byword, must also cast some slur upon the escutcheon of the Bulstrodes. Sir Bernard Burke, compiling the romance of the county families, would tell that cruel story, and hinting cautiously at Aurora's guilt, would scarcely fail to add, that the suspected lady's cousin had married Talbot Raleigh Bulstrode, Esq., eldest son and heir of Sir John Walter Raleigh Bulstrode, Baronet, of Bulstrode Castle, Cornwall.

Now, although the detective had affected a hopeful and even mysterious manner in his brief interview with Talbot, he had not succeeded in hoodwinking that gentleman, who had a vague

suspicion that all was not quite right, and that Mr. Joseph Grimstone was by no means so certain of success as he pretended to be.

"It's my firm belief that this man Hargraves has given him the slip," Talbot thought. "He said something about believing him to be in Doncaster, and then the next moment added that he might be further off. It's clear, therefore, that Grimstone doesn't know where he is; and in that case it's as likely as not that the man's made off with his money, and will get away from England, in spite of us. If he does this——"

Mr. Bulstrode did not finish the sentence. He had reached the north lodge, and dismounted to open the iron gate. The lights of the house shone hospitably far away beyond the wood, and the voices of some men about the stable-gates sounded faintly in the distance; but the north lodge and the neglected shrubbery around it were as silent as the grave, and had a certain phantom-like air in the dim moonlight.

Talbot led his horse through the gates. He looked up at the windows of the lodge, as he passed, half involuntarily; but he stopped with a suppressed exclamation of surprise, at the sight of

a feeble glimmer, which was not the moonlight, in the window of that upper chamber in which the murdered man had slept. Before that exclamation had well-nigh crossed his lips, [the light had disappeared.

If any one of the Mellish grooms or stable-boys had beheld that brief apparition, he would have incontinently taken to his heels, and rushed breathless to the stables, with a wild story of some supernatural horror in the north lodge; but Mr. Bulstrode being altogether of another mettle, walked softly on, still leading his horse, until he was well out of ear-shot of any one within the lodge, when he stopped and tied the Red Rover's bridle to a tree, and turned back towards the north gates, leaving the corn-fed covert hack cropping greedily at dewy hazel twigs, and any greenmeat within his reach.

The heir of Sir John Walter Raleigh Bulstrode crept back to the lodge, almost as noiselessly as if he had been educated for Mr. Grimstone's profession, choosing the grassy pathway beneath the trees for his cautious footsteps. As he approached the wooden paling that shut in the little garden of the lodge, the light which had

been so suddenly extinguished, reappeared behind the white curtain of the upper window.

"It's queer!" mused Mr. Bulstrode, as he watched the feeble glimmer; "but I dare say there's nothing in it. The associations of this place are strong enough to make one attach a foolish importance to anything connected with it. I think I heard John say the gardeners keep their tools there, and I suppose it's one of them. But it's late, too, for any of them to be at work."

It had struck ten while Mr. Bulstrode rode homeward; and it was more than unlikely that any of the Mellish servants would be out at such a time.

Talbot lingered by the wicket-gate, irresolute as to what he should do next, but thoroughly determined to see the last of this late visitor at the north lodge, when the shadow of a man flitted across the white curtain,—a shadow even more weird and ungainly than such things are;—the shadow of a man with a hump-back!

Talbot Bulstrode uttered no cry of surprise; but his heart knocked furiously against his ribs, and the blood rushed hotly to his face. He never remembered having seen the "Softy;" but he had

always heard him described as a hump-backed man. There could be no doubt of the shadow's identity; there could be still less doubt that Stephen Hargraves had visited that place for no good purpose. What could bring him there—to that place above all other places, which, if he were indeed guilty, he would surely most desire to avoid? Stolid, semi-idiotic, as he was supposed to be, surely the common terrors of the lowest assassin, half brute, half Caliban, would keep him away from that spot. These thoughts did not occupy more than those few moments in which the violent beating of Talbot Bulstrode's heart held him powerless to move or act; then, pushing open the gate, he rushed across the tiny garden, trampling recklessly upon the neglected flower-beds, and softly tried the door. It was firmly secured with a heavy chain and padlock.

"He has got in at the window, then," thought Mr. Bulstrode. "What, in Heaven's name, could be his motive in coming here?"

Talbot was right. The little lattice-window had been wrenched nearly off its hinges, and hung loosely among the tangled foliage that surrounded it. Mr. Bulstrode did not hesitate a moment

before he plunged head foremost into the narrow aperture through which the "Softy" must have found his way, and scrambled as he could into the little room. The lattice, strained still further, dropped, with a crashing noise, behind him; but not soon enough to serve as a warning for Stephen Hargraves, who appeared upon the lowest step of the tiny corkscrew staircase at the same moment. He was carrying a tallow candle in a battered tin candlestick in his right hand, and he had a small bundle under his left arm. His white face was no whiter than usual, but he presented an awfully corpse-like appearance to Mr. Bulstrode, who had never seen him, or noticed him, before. The "Softy" recoiled, with a gesture of intense terror, as he saw Talbot; and a box of lucifer-matches, which he had been carrying in the candlestick, rolled to the ground.

"What are you doing here?" asked Mr. Bulstrode, sternly; "and why did you come in at the window?"

"I warn't doin' no wrong;" the "Softy" whined piteously; "and it aint your business neither," he added, with a feeble attempt at insolence.

"It is my business. I am Mr. Mellish's friend

and relation; and I have reason to suspect that you are here for no good purpose," answered Talbot. "I insist upon knowing what you came for."

"I haven't come to steal owght, anyhow," said Mr. Hargraves; "there's nothing here but chairs and tables, and 'taint loikely I've come arter them."

"Perhaps not; but you have come after something, and I insist upon knowing what it is. You wouldn't come to this place unless you'd a very strong reason for coming. What have you got there?"

Mr. Bulstrode pointed to the bundle carried by the "Softy." Stephen Hargraves' small red-brown eyes evaded those of his questioner, and made believe to mistake the direction in which Talbot looked.

"What have you got there?" repeated Mr. Bulstrode; "you know well enough what I mean. What have you got there, in that bundle under your arm?"

The "Softy" clutched convulsively at the dingy bundle, and glared at his questioner with something of the savage terror of some ugly animal at bay. Except that in his brutalized manhood, he was more awkward, and perhaps more repulsive, than the ugliest of the lower animals.

"It's nowght to you, nor to anybody else," he muttered sulkily. "I suppose a poor chap may fetch his few bits of clothes without being *called* like this?"

"What clothes? Let me see the clothes?"

"No, I won't; they're nowght to you. They—it's only an old weskit as was give me by one o' th' lads in th' steables."

"A waistcoat!" cried Mr. Bulstrode; "let me see it this instant. A waistcoat of yours has been particularly inquired for, Mr. Hargraves. It's a chocolate waistcoat, with yellow stripes and brass buttons, unless I'm very much mistaken. Let me see it."

Talbot Bulstrode was almost breathless with excitement. The "Softy" stared aghast at the description of his waistcoat, but he was too stupid to comprehend instantaneously the reason for which this garment was wanted. He recoiled for a few paces, and then made a rush towards the window; but Talbot's hands closed upon his collar, and held him as if in a vice.

"You'd better not trifle with me," cried Mr. Bulstrode; "I've been accustomed to deal with refractory Sepoys in India, and I've had a strug-

gle with a tiger before now. Show me that waistcoat!"

"I won't!"

"By the Heaven above us, you shall!"

"I won't!"

The two men closed with each other in a hand-to-hand struggle. Powerful as the soldier was, he found himself more than matched by Stephen Hargraves, whose thick-set frame, broad shoulders, and sinewy arms were almost Herculean in their build. The struggle lasted for a considerable time,—or for a time that seemed considerable to both of the combatants; but at last it drew towards its termination, and the heir of all the Bulstrodes, the commander of squadrons of horse, the man who had done battle with bloodthirsty Sikhs, and ridden against the black mouths of Russian cannon at Balaclava, felt that he could scarcely hope to hold out much longer against the half-witted hanger-on of the Mellish stables. The horny fingers of the "Softy" were upon his throat, the long arms of the "Softy" were writhing round him, and in another moment Talbot Bulstrode lay upon the floor of the north lodge, with the "Softy's" knee planted upon his heaving chest.

Another moment, and in the dim moonlight,—the candle had been thrown down and trampled upon in the beginning of the scuffle,—the heir of Bulstrode Castle saw Stephen Hargraves fumbling with his disengaged hand in his breast-pocket.

One moment more, and Mr. Bulstrode heard that sharp metallic noise only associated with the opening of a clasp-knife.

"E'es," hissed the "Softy," with his hot breath close upon the fallen man's cheek, "you wanted t' see th' weskit, did you; but you sha'n't, for I'll serve you as I served him. 'Taint loikely I'll let you stand between me and two thousand pound."

Talbot Raleigh Bulstrode had a faint notion that a broad Sheffield blade flashed in the silvery moonlight; but at this moment his senses grew confused under the iron grip of the "Softy's" hand, and he knew little, except that there was a sudden crashing of glass behind him, a quick trampling of feet, and a strange voice roaring some seafaring oath above his head. The suffocating pressure was suddenly removed from his throat; some one, or something, was hurled into a corner of the little room; and Mr. Bulstrode

sprang to his feet, a trifle dazed and bewildered, but quite ready to do battle again.

"Who is it?" he cried.

"It's me, Samuel Prodder," answered the voice that had uttered that dreadful seafaring oath. "You were pretty nigh done for, mate, when I came aboard. It aint the first time I've been up here after dark, takin' a quiet stroll and a pipe, before turning in over yonder." Mr. Prodder indicated Doncaster by a backward jerk of his thumb. "I'd been watchin' the light from a distance, till it went out suddenly five minutes ago, and then I came up close to see what was the matter. I don't know who you are, or what you are, or why you've been quarrelling; but I know you've been pretty near as nigh your death to-night as ever that chap was in the wood."

"The waistcoat!" gasped Mr. Bulstrode; "let me see the waistcoat!"

He sprang once more upon the "Softy," who had rushed towards the door, and was trying to beat out the panel with his iron-bound clog; but this time Mr. Bulstrode had a stalwart ally in the merchant-captain.

"A bit of rope comes uncommon handy in these

cases," said Samuel Prodder; "for which reason I always make a point of carrying it somewhere about me."

He plunged up to his elbow in one of the capacious pockets of his tourist peg-tops, and produced a short coil of tarry rope. As he might have lashed a seaman to a mast in the last crisis of a wreck, so he lashed Mr. Stephen Hargraves now, binding him right and left, until the struggling arms and legs, and writhing trunk, were fain to be still.

"*Now*, if you want to ask him any questions, I make no doubt he'll answer 'em," said Mr. Prodder, politely. "You'll find him a deal quieter after that."

"I can't thank you now," Talbot answered hurriedly; "there'll be time enough for that by-and-by."

"Ay, ay, to be sure, mate," growled the captain; "no thanks is needed where no thanks is due. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Yes, a good deal presently; but I must find this waistcoat first. Where did he put it, I wonder? Stay, I'd better try and get a light. Keep your eye upon that man while I look for it."

Captain Prodder only nodded. He looked upon

his scientific lashing of the "Softy" as the triumph of art; but he hovered near his prisoner in compliance with Talbot's request, ready to fall upon him if he should make any attempt to stir.

There was enough moonlight to enable Mr. Bulstrode to find the lucifers and candlestick after a few minutes' search. The candle was not improved by having been trodden upon; but Talbot contrived to light it, and then set to work to look for the waistcoat.

The bundle had rolled into a corner. It was tightly bound with a quantity of whip-cord, and was harder than it could have been had it consisted solely of the waistcoat.

"Hold the light for me while I undo this," Talbot cried, thrusting the candlestick into Mr. Prodder's hand. He was so impatient that he could scarcely wait while he cut the whipcord about the bundle with the "Softy's" huge clasp-knife, which he had picked up while searching for the candle.

"I thought so," he said, as he unrolled the waistcoat; "the money's here."

The money was there, in a small Russia-leather pocket-book, in which Aurora had given it to the

murdered man. If there had been any confirmation needed for this fact, the savage yell of rage which broke from Stephen's lips would have afforded that confirmation.

"It's the money," cried Talbot Bulstrode. "I call upon you, sir, to bear witness, whoever you may be, that I find this waistcoat and this pocket-book in the possession of this man, and that I take them from him after a struggle, in which he attempts my life."

"Ay, ay! I know him well enough," muttered the sailor; he's a bad 'un; and him and me have had a stand further, before this."

"And I call upon you to bear witness that this man is the murderer of James Conyers."

"WHAT?" roared Samuel Prodder; "him! Why, the double-dyed villain: it was him that put it into my head that it was my sister Eliza's chi—that it was Mrs. Mellish——"

"Yes, yes, I know. But we've got him now. Will you run to the house, and send some of the men to fetch a constable, while I stop here?"

Mr. Prodder assented willingly. He had assisted Talbot in the first instance without any idea of what the business was to lead to. Now he was

quite as much excited as Mr. Bulstrode. He scrambled through the lattice, and ran off to the stables, guided by the lighted windows of the groom's dormitories.

Talbot waited very quietly while he was gone. He stood at a few paces from the "Softy," watching Mr. Hargraves as he gnawed savagely at his bonds, in the hope perhaps of setting himself free.

"I shall be ready for you," the young Cornishman said quietly, "whenever you're ready for me."

A crowd of grooms and hangers-on came with lanterns before the constables could arrive; and foremost amongst them came Mr. John Mellish, very noisy and very unintelligible. The door of the lodge was opened, and they all burst into the little chamber, where, heedless of grooms, gardeners, stable-boys, hangers-on, and rabble, John Mellish fell on his friend's breast and wept aloud.

L'Envoi.

What more have I to tell of this simple drama of domestic life? The end has come. The element of tragedy which has been so intermingled in the history of a homely Yorkshire squire and his wife, is henceforth to be banished

from the record of their lives. The dark story which began in Aurora Floyd's folly, and culminated in the crime of a half-witted serving-man, has been told from the beginning to the end. It would be worse than useless to linger upon the description of a trial which took place at York at the Michaelmas Assizes. The evidence against Stephen Hargraves was conclusive; and the gallows outside York Castle ended the life of a man who had never been either help or comfort to any one of his fellow-creatures. There was an attempt made to set up a plea of irresponsibility upon the part of the "Softy," and the *sobriquet* which had been given him was urged in his defence; but a set of matter-of-fact-jurymen looking at the circumstances of the murder, saw nothing in it but a most cold-blooded assassination, perpetrated by a wretch whose sole motive was gain; and the verdict which found Stephen Hargraves guilty, was tempered by no recommendation to mercy. The condemned murderer protested his innocence up to the night before his execution, and upon that night made a full confession of his crime, as is generally the custom of his kind. He related how he had followed James Conyers into the

wood upon the night of his assignation with Aurora, and how he had watched and listened during the interview. He had shot the trainer in the back while Mr. Conyers sat by the water's edge looking over the notes in the pocket-book, and he had used a button off his waistcoat instead of wadding, not finding anything else suitable for the purpose. He had hidden the waistcoat and pocket-book in a rat-hole in the wainscoat of the murdered man's chamber, and, being dismissed from the lodge suddenly, had been compelled to leave his booty behind him, rather than excite suspicion. It was thus that he had returned upon the night on which Talbot found him, meaning to secure his prize and start for Liverpool at six o'clock the following morning.

Aurora and her husband left Mellish Park immediately after the committal of the "Softy" to York prison. They went to the south of France, accompanied by Archibald Floyd, and once more travelled together through scenes which were overshadowed by no sorrowful association. They lingered long at Nice, and here Talbot and Lucy joined them, with an impedimental train of luggage and servants, and a Normandy nurse with a blue-

eyed girl-baby. It was at Nice that another baby was born, a black-eyed child—a boy, I believe—but wonderfully like that solemn-faced infant which Mrs. Alexander Floyd carried to the widowed banker two-and-twenty years before at Felden Woods.

It is almost supererogatory to say that Samuel Prodder, the sea-captain, was cordially received by hearty John Mellish and his wife. He is to be a welcome visitor at the Park whenever he pleases to come; indeed, he is homeward bound from Barbadoes at this very time, his cabin-presses filled to overflowing with presents which he is carrying to Aurora, in the way of chillis preserved in vinegar, guava-jelly, the strongest Jamaica rum, and other trifles suitable for a lady's acceptance. It may be some comfort to the gentlemen in Scotland Yard to know that John Mellish acted liberally to the detective, and gave him the full reward, although Talbot Bulstrode had been the captor of the "Softy."

So we leave Aurora, a little changed, a shade less defiantly bright, perhaps, but unspeakably beautiful and tender, bending over the cradle of her first-born; and though there are alterations

being made at Mellish, and loose-boxes for brood mares building upon the site of the north lodge, and a subscription tan-gallop being laid across Harper's Common, I doubt if my heroine will care so much for horseflesh, or take quite so keen an interest in weight-for-age races as compared to handicaps, as she has done in the days that are gone.

THE END.

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